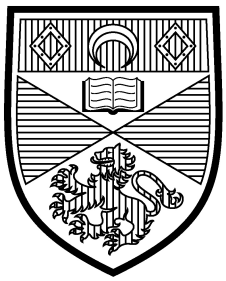
# Knowing Best? An Ethnographic Exploration of the Politics and Practices of an International NGO in Senegal

by

Máire Ní Mhórdha



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## Candidate's declaration

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This is a study of a high profile international development organisation that attempts to bring about the end of female genital cutting (FGC) in West Africa. I am requesting that the thesis be embargoed to protect the identity of my informants (workers in the organisation). Given the well-known character of the organisation and its unique profile, I cannot disguise the organisation itself or the name of its Director. Although I have anonymised all other individual informants, I believe that they could still be identifiable to readers familiar with the organisation. Publication would therefore be in breach of ethics, as it would violate the agreed consent for protection of anonymity on which this research is premised. Furthermore, the thesis discusses a variety of sensitive data (including on the practice of FGC, which is illegal in Senegal), collected from within a relatively closed network of people associated with the organisation. For this reason, and due to the critical ethnographic approach of the analysis, publication may compromise the organisation and related individuals in relation to each other and to the external parties on which they are reliant for funding and support. For these reasons I am requesting a five-year embargo on all print and electronic publication, to be reviewed in advance of expiry to determine the status of these conditions.

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# Abstract

This thesis explores the social and political relations of an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Senegal. NGOs and international development have been the subject of research from a number of different perspectives, including the politics (and anti-politics) of development, post-development, structural violence and the 'everyday lives' of NGO participants and workers (Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995; Farmer 2004; Bornstein 2005; Hilhorst 2003). The present study builds on this scholarship through an ethnographic exploration of the networks of people involved with Tostan, an American NGO based in Senegal whose developmental objective is to engender social change among rural groups in Senegal (particularly those that practice female genital cutting), using a human rights education framework.

Through identification and scrutiny of the organisation's macro- and micro-level social relations, I critically examine how 'development' operates as a cultural and political process. I focus analytically on conceptions of knowledge and ignorance, particularly the ways in which these constructions are acted upon and utilised by different actors within the organisation. I argue that, as an NGO (and thus a 'moral actor,' Guilhot 2005: 6) within the contemporary donor-driven development industry, a key preoccupation for Tostan as an organisation is the management of perception, or a concern for the 'spectacle of development' (Allen 2013). Flowing from this argument is the assertion that the activities carried out by actors at every level of the organisation to produce and re-produce particular narratives through strategic knowing and unknowing are as significant (if not more so) as the formal programmatic activities implemented by the organisation 'on the ground.'

As David Mosse argues, development involves not only social work, but also the conceptual work of 'enrolment, persuasion, agreement and argument that lies behind the consensus and coherence necessary to sustain authoritative narratives and networks for the continued support of policy' (Mosse 2005: 34). As I argue here, NGO actors work to (re)produce, project and protect particular narratives, through the strategic exercise of knowledge and ignorance, in order to access or consolidate positions of power within the politics of aid. Drawing on critical theories of development and human rights (e.g. Sachs 1992; Escobar 1991, 1995; Guilhot 2005, inter alia), within a political context succinctly described by Ellen Foley (2010: 9) as 'the neoliberalization of just about everything,' I explore how actors across the organisation are linked in a web of cultural and political presuppositions, values, and motivations.

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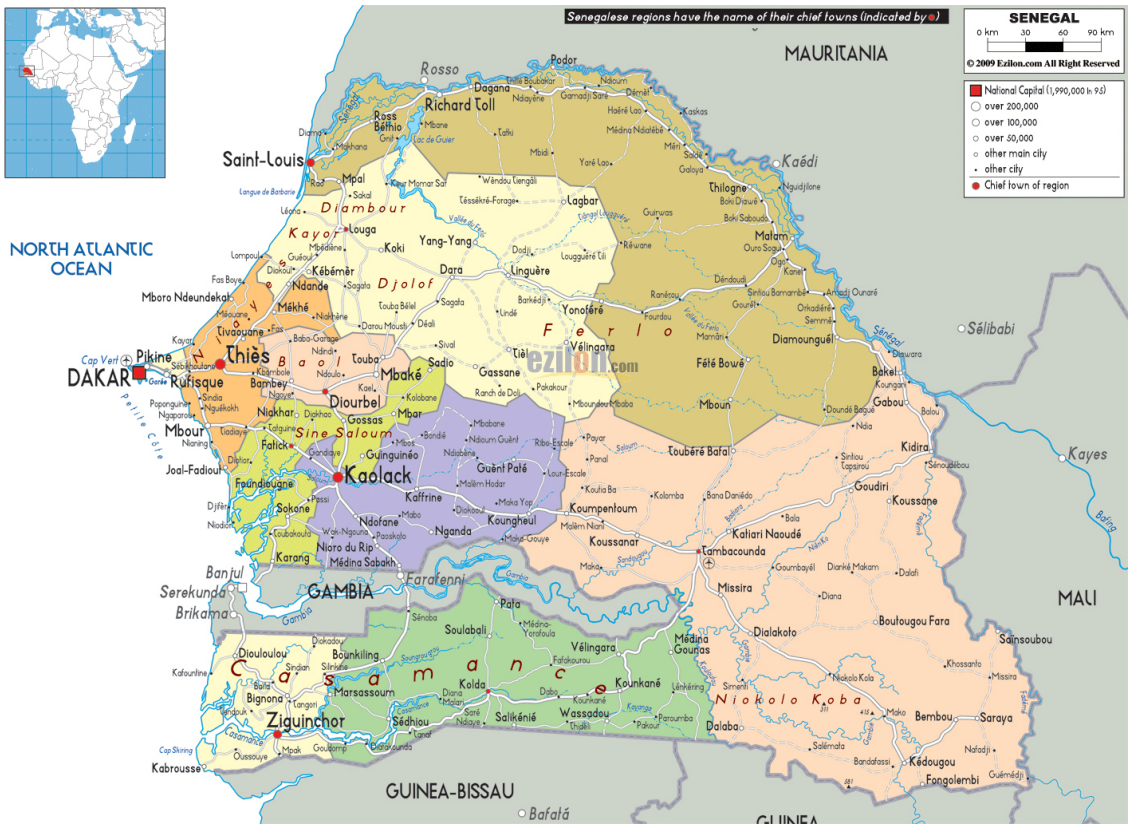
*To my parents, Attracta and Jimmy, le grá agus le buíochas*

*&*

*To Sadou, who makes everything possible*


Senegalese regions have the name of their chief towns (indicated by ●)
SENEGAL
0 km 30 60 90 km
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National Capital (1,990,000 in 93)
over 200,000
over 100,000
over 50,000
other main city
other city
Chief town of region
MAURITANIA
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
Saint-Louis
Richard Toll
Podor
Rosso
Dagana
Ross Béthio
Kaédi
Matam
Sélibabi
Kayes
MALI
Louga
Kébémèr
Linguère
Diourbel
Mbaké
Kaolack
Fatick
Gossas
Thiès
DAKAR
Rufisque
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Joal-Fadiout
Foundiougne
Sokone
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Koungheul
Nganda
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Médina Sabakh
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Salikénié
Sédhiou
Bignona
Marsassoum
Diouloulou
Bounkiling
Ziguinchor
Kabrousse
Cap Skiring
Cap Vert
Pointe Sarène
Langue de Barbarie
Baie de Gorée
Pointe Sarène
Gambie
Casamance
Niokolo Koba
Bafatá
GUINEA-BISSAU
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Dialakoto
Médina Gounas
Missira
Diana
Tambacounda
Katiari Naoudé
Koumpentoum
Koussanar
Goumbayél
Dianké Makan
Dalafi
Koulda Ba
Bana Daniédo
Koulomba
Toubéré Bafal
Mbour
Félé Bowé
Diamounguél
Vélingara
Linguère
Yonofére
Dodji
Louguéré Tili
Réwane
Matam
Ourossogui
Orkadiéré
Semmé
Gourél
Sinthiou Barrambé
Amadi Ounaré
Dembancané
Ranérou
Guiros
Boki Diawé
Boki Saboudé
Thilogne
Ngueldjilone
Galoya
Yaré Lao
Mbidi
Haéré Lao
Médina Ndiathbé
Kaskas
Gamadji Sare
Ndiayène
Ndiaum
Démet
Podor
Thiel Boubakar
Mboumba
Mbaba
Pakakour
Ranch de Dolé
Mbadane
Ndiobène
Ndiaum Guéth
Guéth Pathé
Ribo Escale
Loun Escale
Payar
Panal
Koulda Ba
Kolomba
Maka Yop
Maka
Maka Coulibantang
Malem Hodar
Malem Niani
Sandiara
Bandé
Mbadane
Mboro
Ndiaye
Ndiaye Ndiaye
Ndiaye Sar
Mpal
Sakal
Kher Momar Sar
Wendou Bosseabé
Wendou Gengali
Tessékré-Forage
Lagbar
Guiros
Tatki
Mbidi
Yaré Lao
Galoya
Thilogne
Ngueldjilone
Boki Diawé
Boki Saboudé
Matam
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Amadi Ounaré
Dembancané
Ranérou
Guiros
Podor
Dagana
Richard Toll
Ross Béthio
Saint-Louis
Rosso
Diama
Mbantou
Lac de Guier
Mbane
Tatki
Mbidi
Yaré Lao
Galoya
Thilogne
Ngueldjilone

In any society the dominant groups are the ones with the most to hide about the way society works. Very often therefore truthful analyses are bound to have a critical ring, to seem like exposures rather that objective statements... For all students of human society sympathy with the victims of historical processes and scepticism about the victors' claims provide essential safeguards against being taken in by the dominant mythology. A scholar who tries to be objective needs these feelings as part of his working equipment.

Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966: 522-523)

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Methods, Motivations and Context

> I didn't go to change the culture, that's what's so ironic. I went to *give value* to the culture.
>
> Molly Melching, Tostan founder (Linsky 2010, emphasis in original)

> With Molly's help, the community had created a new vocabulary for talking about the most important issues they face, and they were using it to make all sorts of improvements to their lives. I have not thought the same way about the work I do at the Gates Foundation since that day.
>
> Melinda Gates, global philanthropist (2013)

> What difference it would make to our understanding if we looked at the world as a whole, a totality, a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures; if we understood better how this totality developed over time; if we took seriously the admonition to think of human aggregates as 'inextricably involved with other aggregates, near and far, in weblike, netlike, connections.'
>
> Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (1982: 385)

### Niassène Diola, Kolda, December 2007

Around midday on Saturday, 15 December 2007, Mamadou Diémé, the chief of Niassène Diola, a village in Sédhiou, in the Kolda region of Senegal, was dressed in his finest robes and ready to welcome a large, diverse group of visitors to his village. The occasion was a two-day 'Public Declaration for the Abandonment of Excision and Child/Forced Marriage,' organised by the NGO Tostan, to be hosted along with the neighbouring village of Diafar Douma. The villagers and the NGO's representatives in the city of Ziguinchor, around 70km away, had been preparing for this event for weeks in advance. Speeches and schedules had been carefully composed, and local and national media organisations had been invited to report on the event. Beds had been prepared throughout homes in the village to host the visitors, and women had been working since dawn to prepare heavy platters of rice, couscous, fish and vegetables (supplied by Tostan) for the

celebratory meal to follow the Declaration. As a delegation representing 115 local communities swept into the village of around 1,200 people, flanked by journalists, local government officials, and NGO staffers and volunteers, the warm air began to buzz with excitement and anticipation as the sleepy village transformed into the site of a very cosmopolitan gathering.

That afternoon a press conference was held during which local dignitaries, speaking into a cluster of microphones, heaped praise on Tostan, enthusiastically declaring that with the advent of the NGO, their villages had become cleaner, more peaceful and healthier. The school principal, Adama Mané, announced that human rights doctrine now formed the basis of all collective and individual decision-making. Mamadou Diemé opened the formal Declaration ceremony with a speech thanking Tostan, followed by a prayer led by the village imam, Arfan Ousmane Diemé, who noted that the lessons taught by Tostan reinforced the teachings of the Qu'ran. A village youth group performed 'awareness-raising' sketches on the dangers associated with *excision* and early marriage. This message was reinforced by the speech of an ex-cutter, Aïssatou Diedhiou, heading a group of 5 former '*exciseuses,*' who declared that the women had 'dropped their knives' once they had learned of the dangers of *excision*.

Like all such 'Public Declarations' organised by Tostan, the event at Niassène Diola was reported in the local and national press. The Dakar-based newspaper *Le Quotidien* quoted ex-cutter Aïssatou Diedhiou's 'solemn statement' as follows:

> I am a cutter. I thought that excision was good for women, that's why I excised many girls. But, I have come to learn that in fact I have done much harm to them. I have decided to put away my knives. I ask their forgiveness. (Bassene 2008; my translation from the French)

In addition to effusive statements from former cutters declaring their sorrow at the harm they had caused and their firm declaration to cease the practice, the article also reported that they planned to seek financial compensation from the State and Tostan, for the loss of income following their decision to abandon the activity. The cutters had been paid an average of 1,500 FCFA (around £2) per girl to perform the procedure on every girl in the locality, the paper reported, and needed this money to feed their families. The local sub-prefect, Samba Ly, stated that this demand for financial compensation seemed to be a legitimate request, but in fact had no *raison d'être,* as the entire community had decided to cease the practice together. He urged the ex-cutters to seek financial aid from Tostan and UNICEF (ibid.). In contrast, in the run-up to the Declaration, an

'inter-village meeting' was held by Tostan with participant villages: an internally produced report on the meeting noted that cutters 'asked for no financial compensation,' but were simply 'overjoyed' at the new knowledge they had received and the upcoming Declaration to publicise it. The report, written for a major donor, noted that when the ex-cutters had been asked about their feelings concerning the imminent declaration and what they hope to accomplish through it, they had stated that it had become their 'obsession to see the total abandonment of FGC (female genital cutting) as well as Child/Forced Marriages across Senegal.'

The audience at Niassène Diola was addressed by glowing speeches from a number of participants and local dignitaries, and the event was brought to a close by chief Mamadou Diemé, who proclaimed that, thanks to Tostan 'the local women and girls have been enlightened and are now in good health.' Overall, the narrative communicated by speakers at the event was one of advancement and enlightenment through the acquisition of knowledge (in this case, human rights and biomedical knowledge); of a transition forward from darkness to light, from ill-health to good health, and from poverty to prosperity.

## Bignona, Lower Casamance, April 2010

'*Ouonck dit oui à l'abandon de l'excision, des mariages précoces et forcés*' ('Ouonck says yes to the abandonment of excision, child and forced marriage'), proclaimed a handwritten placard grasped by a carefully made-up, slightly impassive-looking young woman, dressed in a starchy new waxed pink and brown *taille basse* ensemble. Standing quite still, with her sleeping baby strapped to her back and her handbag clutched tightly under her arm, the young mother's face conveyed an expression of aloofness, perhaps slight boredom, as she stood among the throng of people gathered at the Emile Badiane roundabout in the town of Bignona. The assembled crowd consisted mostly of women, dressed in waves of matching pink, red, and brown, and carrying colourful placards. They chatted among themselves, waiting for the day's proceedings to begin.

It was a bright Saturday morning in late April 2010, and a major event was taking place in Bignona: a 'Departmental Declaration on Female Genital Cutting and Child/Forced Marriage,' organised by Tostan. An even larger affair than the Niassène Diola Declaration, this event brought together representatives from 333 villages in the administrative *département* of Bignona, as well as visitors from around Senegal, neighbouring Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia. Around 10.30 a.m., the assembled crowd began to march towards the site of the Declaration where a stage

and marquees had been set up. They began to sing and dance, as a prelude to the celebration.

Around midday, Mamadou Lamine Keita, the Senegalese Minister for Youth and a native of Bignona, arrived and was met with a standing ovation. The ceremony now began in earnest. Teenagers from Tobor and Bignona took to the stage and performed the Senegalese national anthem, and were followed by the Mayor of Bignona, who welcomed guests and made a speech on the importance of abandoning practices such as *excision* in order to protect women's health. Various speakers took to the microphone to give their thoughts on the importance of the Declaration. Mamadou Ndao Ba, the president of the Declaration's steering committee requested that Tostan continue its efforts to 'completely eradicate poverty,' proclaiming, 'a muscle that doesn't exercise will atrophy.'

A short theatrical skit followed, performed in the Jola, Fulani and Creole languages by local teenagers, who enacted two stories. The first told of an adolescent girl whose father wanted her to leave school and marry a local man who had emigrated to the United States. The girl and her mother resisted this pressure and convinced the father to allow the girl to stay in school instead. The second skit told the story of a woman who was unable to have children because she had undergone *excision*.

Following these performances, a local medical officer spoke of the health consequences of *excision*, highlighting the risk of death, HIV/AIDS transmission, and difficulties in childbirth. A hush then fell on the proceedings as, gathering under colourful, handwritten banners proclaiming 'the total abandonment of excision: YES WE CAN' (doubtless in homage to the electoral campaign of US President, Barack Obama), and 'Bignona and its surroundings have definitively turned their backs on excision and early marriage,' a group of women, speaking in Jola, Fulani and Mandinka, declared that their communities had 'abandoned excision and child or forced marriage.' More speeches followed, and finally the local UNICEF field officer took to the podium, announcing her pleasure at participating in the event. She outlined how the Declaration's ideals matched the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and contributed to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The crowd listened, clapped and cheered, and once the event was pronounced over, scattered for a very late lunch. It had been a long day of excitement in the heat.

## 'Walking away from the past': the NGO Tostan and FGC

The two events taking place in southern Senegal described here were organised by the American non-governmental development organisation, Tostan. According to an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled 'Walking Away from the Past,' Tostan is 'widely considered the blueprint for all campaigns to end female [genital] cutting' (Reaves 2007) and the organisation's education programme is viewed as an example of a 'best practice' approach to ending FGC by development institutions such as UNICEF, which supports its claim to achieving abandonment 'within a generation' (UNICEF 2007).[1]

Customary female genital alteration practices have been labelled ('female genital mutilation/cutting'), defined ('all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons') and classified (into four 'types')[2] by the World Health Organisation, which designates the procedures 'a violation of the human rights of girls and women… reflect[ing] deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitut[ing] an extreme form of discrimination against women' (WHO 2013).

The WHO estimates that around 130 million girls and women worldwide have undergone some form of 'FGM/C.' The majority of these live in more than 28 countries in Africa, although the practices are also known in parts of the Middle East and Asia. Despite the broad spectrum of cutting practices in existence, ranging from 'symbolic circumcision' (e.g. 'a slight prick of the clitoris or, in some communities, the application of red color or some other, nonintrusive gesture,' Silverman 2004: 428) to more invasive techniques such as clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation, all forms are condemned and in many countries (including Senegal) are criminalised. According to the most recent Demographic and Health Surveys, around a quarter of women in Senegal aged 15-49 have undergone 'female circumcision' (DHS 2012: 16).

[1] In this thesis, I use the terms 'FGC,' *excision* (French), or sunay (Jola), depending on the context, as these were the emic terms used by key actors. In English, Tostan officially uses the term 'FGC' as it considers this designation 'less judgmental and value-laden' than the frequently used 'female genital mutilation (FGM)' (Tostan 2011a).

[2] 'Type I: Clitoridectomy—Removal of the prepuce with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris; Type II: Excision—Removal of the prepuce and clitoris together with partial or total excision of the labia minora; Type III: Infibulation—Removal of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening; Type IV: Unclassified—All other procedures that involve partial or total removal of the female external genitalia and/or injury to the female genital organs for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons' (WHO 2013).

FGC has become a topic of interest (and contention) for many groups and individuals globally, including the organisation studied here, and activities to stop the practices usually fall under the charitable or non-governmental (as well as governmental) rubrics. As part of the ever increasing focus on 'women' and 'gender' in both radical and orthodox discourses of development—ranging, for example, from feminist pronouncements on the focus on gender in development as 'the other revolution' (Sharma 1999), to the statement by the World Bank (1995) that 'gender equality is not only a matter of social justice but also of good economics'—FGC has in many ways become a poster child for the presumed oppression of subaltern women and their need for 'development,' or indeed freedom (see Sen 1999).[3]

In July 2007, Niassène Diola and thirty other Jola Fonyi villages had completed Tostan's 30-month long 'Community Empowerment Program,' managed by the Tostan regional office in Ziguinchor and funded by a US philanthropic organisation, the Annenberg Foundation. According to Tostan's Ziguinchor Coordinator, Abdoulaye Diao, the Declaration was the culmination of 'diverse awareness-raising and social mobilisation activities designed to bring about positive behaviour change among the population.' The overall aim of the programme, he said, was the 'capacity building' of local communities, and ultimately the complete abandonment of 'harmful traditional practices' such as 'female genital cutting' (*excision*) and 'child or forced marriage.' This was achieved through 'sustainable development and respect for human rights,' Diao said. Taught by locally sourced '*facilitateurs*' who followed a curriculum prescribed by Tostan, the programme's messages were spread to a wider audience through a method called 'organised diffusion' whereby participants adopted friends and relatives in neighbouring villages and communicated the information they had learned to them. This led to an even greater spread of knowledge, according to Diao, reaching villages that had not had the chance to undergo the NGO's education programme directly. Theatre, song and dance were key to communicating these messages, he concluded, and helped to 'sensitise' ('*sensibiliser*') local men who were hesitant to permit their wives to join in the programme.

The events at Niassène Diola and Bignona exemplify one of the cornerstones of Tostan's approach to ending FGC through its human rights-based development programme: the 'Public

[3] In a 2008 interview US President Barack Obama illustrated this view with the statement that, 'the best judge of whether or not a country is going to develop is how it treats its women. If it's educating its girls, if women have equal rights, that country is going to move forward. But if women are oppressed and abused and illiterate, then they're going to fall behind' (Salvatore 2008).

Declaration.' An article on Tostan's website entitled 'The Path to a Public Declaration' affirms that, 'communities in Senegal are bound by the weight of their words, and making an announcement in a public setting reflects endorsement of the new social norm—no one will be ostracized for deciding not to engage in a practice when all have collectively agreed to stop it' (Tostan 2013a). However, it also cautions that, 'as Tostan has always explained and as our external evaluations have shown, abandonment following our program and a public declaration for abandonment is not 100 percent' (ibid.). The entry concludes that, 'public declarations are critical in the process for total abandonment and necessary for building critical mass, eventually leading FGC to becoming a thing of the past' (ibid.).

## Tostan: an evolving entity

As an organisation, Tostan is constantly expanding and evolving. Over the years of my involvement (2007-2011), several new departments were added to meet the increased reporting and communications demands of donors, as well as the needs of new projects arising from the securing of additional funding streams and the opportunities offered by new political agendas (e.g., its 'Child Protection,' 'SMS for Empowerment' and 'Peace and Security' projects). Its field staff in Senegal comprise dozens of field coordinators, supervisors and administrators, and hundreds of sub-contracted community facilitators, while its urban-based office staff number in the tens of permanent administration staff, with up to twenty volunteer interns (mostly expatriates). A small, core management staff, headed by the Director and based in Dakar, reports to a seven-person Board of Directors (six of whom are expatriates, including the Tostan founder and Director herself).

The formalised, hierarchical structure of the organisation is typical of the modern, professional NGO, belying the all-inclusive, participatory rhetoric underpinning it, and supporting Nicolas Guilhot's (2005: 5) observation that:

> Creating and managing an NGO often requires the mobilization of material resources, social capital, linguistic and other international skills that are far from being evenly distributed across society and tend to be concentrated in its upper tiers. In fact, the increased inclusion of NGOs in international forums or organizations and the resulting professionalization of their staffs only increases this tendency.

In Tostan's official discourse, the '*famille de Tostan*' may also include programme participants or 'partner communities,' the numbers of which are not clearly quantified by the organisation. The

term ‘community,’ although frequently used, is rarely defined, and so the actual number of people directly reached by the organisation is ambiguous, although the numbers of communities (often interpreted as villages) affected is usually cited in the thousands (Tostan 2013a). Through its public discourses, great efforts are made by the Tostan management to portray the NGO as a ‘grassroots’ organisation, or even a popular ‘movement,’ rather than a centralised, externally directed and funded bureaucratic institution, deeply embedded in the development industry, with a predetermined ‘nonformal’ education curriculum as its core activity. This attempted representation is illustrated in the Tostan organisational model. The organisational structure is inverted to place the beneficiaries (‘communities’) at the top and the Board of Directors at the bottom (see Appendix A). This simple inversion of the traditional organisational structure looks impressive to donors seeking to support ‘grassroots development,’ but on its own is fairly insignificant and does little to disguise the more hierarchical way in which the organisation functions.

## Studying ‘up,’ ‘sideways’ and ‘down’: the key actors

The endorsement cited at the beginning of the chapter of Tostan’s Director and founder by Melinda Gates, co-Chair of the $38 billion Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and wife of Bill Gates, the world’s richest individual (Dolan and Kroll 2014), illustrates the global linkages of the organisation from its grassroots to powerful global actors. With Tostan as its subject, this thesis aims to study ‘up,’ as well as ‘down’ and ‘sideways,’ in response to Laura Nader’s (1972: 8) declaration that:

> If anthropology were reinvented to study up we would sooner or later need to study down as well. We aren’t dealing with an either/or proposition; we need simply to realise when it is useful or crucial in terms of the problem to extend the domain of study up, down, or sideways.

Many thousands of people are employed in development and poverty alleviation activities across Senegal and the region, and vast sums of money circulate through this globalised industry, financing a huge range of activities. However, as Roderick Stirrat points out, ‘given the size and importance of this industry, our understanding of the people working within it, who they are, where they come from, their hopes and dreams and their own views of what they are doing is very limited, at least from the anthropological point of view’ (Stirrat 2008: 406). This, despite the fact that there are numerous anthropologists employed in the industry, and that these

anthropologists 'often share the same space, both geographical and social, as development workers' (ibid.). It is therefore important to look at the complex macro- and micro-level relationships, social networks, and business practices within which key NGO actors embed themselves. I return to Nader, who illustrated this need most aptly: 'if in reinventing anthropology we were principally studying the most powerful strata of urban society, our view of the ghetto might be largely in terms of those relationships larger than the ghetto' (Nader 1972: 6).

By exploring the practices and politics[4] of Tostan, an NGO that focuses on development through human rights education and 'social change' (Tostan 2009a: 17), I aim to fill this scholarship gap. I shed light on the complex collection of characters found within the organisation, illuminating the perspectives of the different actors (local and expatriate) that convene around its ideologically charged education project. I use the accounts above, and the suggestion from Eric Wolf at the beginning of this chapter, to introduce one of the primary approaches of this study: connecting the global with the local, and shedding light on the connections between the disparate people, processes and politics that converge via the NGO itself.

The research is ethnographically grounded in both urban and rural Senegal (Dakar and Casamance, respectively), a country where the *nodd* (Muslim call to prayer) rings faithfully five times per day across a diverse geographic and social landscape. In Dakar, the Mediterranean-style mansions and brand new 4x4 vehicles of the wealthy are juxtaposed with common indicators of poverty such as barefoot begging *talibé* boys, battered buses and dusty, sparsely equipped hospitals. In Casamance, the main town of Ziguinchor boasts a large blue neon crucifix, overlooking its main roundabout, designated *Rond-point Jean-Paul II*, to the delight of the local (largely Jola) Christian minority. Re-painted Mercedes buses packed with people, luggage and domestic animals depart the *gare routière* regularly to transport clients to local villages and further afield, albeit avoiding night travel as much as possible due to the threat of hold-ups by the *Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance* (MFDC), a separatist group which has been engaged in an increasingly violent insurrection since the early 1980s. Casamance, like the rest of Senegal, is home to a diversity of ethnic groups, the largest being the Jola, as well as a significant number of Mandinka, Fulani and Wolof (the latter being the largest and most influential group in the country at around 40% nationally), inter alia.

[4] In this context I understand politics as encompassing 'all those social, material practices in which the distribution of power is at stake' (Ingraham 1997: 290 in Madison 2005: 70).

I attended the 'Public Declarations' above in two distinct, but somewhat overlapping, capacities: firstly in 2007, as a 'volunteer intern' with the NGO, and secondly, in my capacity as an 'ethnographer of development' (Mosse 2005: 9), with the NGO itself as the focus of my studies. Attending the Niassène Diola Declaration was one of my first visits to a 'Tostan village,' and in the three years following this, I went on to spend much longer periods of fieldwork in the Casamance region, as well as at Tostan's headquarters in Dakar. I experienced the Niassène Diola Public Declaration as an outsider and relative newcomer to the country, having arrived in Senegal just three months earlier. I attended the event alongside colleagues and fellow foreign volunteers from the NGO who had made the trip south for the declaration. I soaked up the enthusiasm of the participants, and enjoyed the pageantry (laughing with everyone else at the theatre sketch about the daughter of a miserly old grump who had fallen ill; she was taken to a traditional healer whose cures were portrayed as laughably, but sadly, no match for hospital care). I was a participant in this event, as much as any of the ex-cutters, with the foreignness of my person serving to highlight the importance of what was occurring, and adding to the special nature of the occasion. The scattering of foreigners, incongruous despite their colourful *boubous,* was representative to the villagers of the NGO itself, and I realised later that an event such as this *déclaration publique* was one of the few instances which brought together representatives of all the constituents of the NGO in one place: village beneficiaries, field staff, volunteers, donors, and urban-based office staff. The 'world' of Tostan is thus a hybrid of the local and the international.

It is within this context of hybridity that the actors central to this thesis operate: village-based programme recipients; its charismatic founder and Director; its expatriate volunteers; and its Dakar-based staff, often co-existing in transnational spaces, or meeting places between the local and the global, and, for some of those involved, between their conceptions of 'tradition' and 'modernity.' Responding to Stirrat's observation above, the ethnographic focus is predominantly on the people working within the organisation, exploring in different ways 'who they are, where they come from, their hopes and dreams and their own views of what they are doing' (Stirrat 2008: 406), within the context of Tostan's human rights-based focus on issues such as FGC. Regarding the study of expatriate development workers (such as Tostan's volunteers, and its founder), Fechter and Hindman (2011: 171) observe that these groups may be 'presumed by the anthropologist to be familiar to reader and writer alike.' They argue for the need to turn the anthropological spotlight on these 'not-so-Other,' despite the fact that 'we' think 'we' already know what 'they' are like, a perspective which 'dehistoricizes the familiar, in the same way as was once done to the "people without history" (Wolf 1982)' (ibid.). Linked to this, I examine

how what Tostan actors do is 'inspired by and affects the power politics of the internal and external control and allocation of NGO resources, ideas and activities' and how activities, in particular related to human rights and female genital cutting, 'are geared towards legitimation, which means that, in order to find clients and supportive stakeholders, [the NGO has to] convince others of [its] appropriateness and trustworthiness as part of the politics of reputation' (Hilhorst 2003: 4). To this end I rely on the anthropological insistence on critical observation, by identifying how hegemonic discourses (in particular contemporary globalised human rights discourse) can be separated from behaviour and to see the relation between the two as problematic. Wolf (1999: 132) argues that in this way, anthropologists are 'more likely to be critics than architects of grand theory. This often assigns to us the unwelcome yet vitally needed role of questioning the certainties of others.'

## Methodology: 'multi-locale' fieldwork

Methodologically, from 2007 to 2008, I was affiliated with Tostan as a volunteer intern based in the city of Thiès, and subsequently as a doctoral researcher (2009-2010, with a return visit in 2011). During the latter period I conducted what George Marcus refers to as 'multi-locale ethnography' where 'the idea is that any cultural identity or activity is constructed by multiple agents in varying contexts, or places, and that ethnography must be strategically conceived to represent this sort of multiplicity' (Marcus 1989: 25). Over this fifteen-month period, I undertook fieldwork in a predominantly Jola village in the southern region of Casamance (for six months), and then in the Senegalese capital, Dakar. Writing on 'the uses of ethnography' Harri Englund observes that, 'ethnographic fieldwork retains its salience in a world of widespread social mobility and transnational links, its proper definition no longer being a descriptive study of "a people" or "an ethnic group"' (Englund 2006: 21). In such a context, my application of the ethnographic method through long-term participant observation fieldwork in Casamance and Dakar, among people who included colleagues and friends from my time as a volunteer, is intended to offer a complex and careful ethnographic analysis through 'comparison, contextualisation of life world[s], and an exposition of the relationships involved' (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007: 5).

Taking the view that the aim of the anthropologist is 'to make a contribution to the understanding of institutions which in a complex way affect the lives of many people' (Serber 1971: 5-6 in Nader 1972: 23), I take a methodologically eclectic approach in the thesis: in addition to drawing

on personal experience and observation at multiple locations across the country, I draw on data from NGO programme documents, institutional and individual social media postings and personal blogs, as well as online and video media sources. I explore recurring themes and concepts of knowledge, ignorance, development and human rights as well as notions of altruism and understandings of culture, unpacking the socio-political meanings of these concepts in the world of Tostan's people. In the sections that follow I describe the contexts within which this fieldwork was carried out, and discuss my position as a researcher within them.

## Fieldwork in Kalounaye, Casamance

Here, I introduce the socio-cultural context and key actors related to the fieldwork I undertook in Casamance, highlighting the recent conversion of the Jola to Islam and their accompanying adoption of female *excision* practices (this being one of the primary reasons I had chosen the area as a site of research), as well as my village field-site's experience with development projects to date.

Casamance is Senegal's southernmost region, nestled between The Gambia to the north and Guinea-Bissau to the south. The area consists of Lower, Middle and Upper Casamance and gives its name to the 320km long Casamance River flowing through the region. Around 60% of *Casamançais* are Jola,[5] a once largely acephalous group of around 300,000 people dwelling on both shores of the Casamance River (Thomas 1959).

The Jola living north of the river are now predominantly Muslim. Writing about the Jola conversion to Islam, historian Paul Nugent (2007: 224) recounts how in the 19th century, the Senegambia region was embroiled in a 'struggle for supremacy' between Mandinka[6] ruling families and Muslim reformers who set out to establish new polities in accordance with *shari'a* law. The Jola were highly resistant to forced conversion and by the end of the 19th century, most of them continued to practice their own beliefs (ibid.). However, during the early part of the 1900s a series of natural disasters affected society in Casamance. Peter Mark argues that 'the cumulative effect of these disasters and of continuing social and economic change, was to

[5] 'Jola' (also referred to in the literature as Diola, Djola, Jóla, Jiola) is a Mandinka term for this group of people who live in Lower Casamance, The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau (Dellenborg 2007).

[6] The Mandinka (variously referred to as Manding, Mandingo, Mandingka, Mandinka, Maninka or Mande) are a West African group generally thought to be descendants of the ancient Mali Empire (Dellenborg 2007).

promote a sense of loss of power over their world' which contributed to a great acceleration in the rate of religious conversion among the Jola (Mark 1978: 1). By the 1920s, conversion had accelerated and Nugent (2007: 234) notes that, by the 1950s, 'the status of Islam had become hegemonic north of the Casamance river.'

The conversion of the Jola to Islam is thus a relatively recent one. Nugent (2008: 942) argues that Islam came to be associated for the Jola with 'the quest for peace and an alternative form of modernity.' Until their conversion to Islam, with its attendant cultural and social impacts, Jola groups continued to share fundamental social and cultural principles including a mode of livelihood based on wet rice production, cultural-political institutions that emphasised decentralised and diffuse power and authority, and a religious system based on spirit shrines and a supreme deity (*emitaay*) (Deschamps 1964). Following conversion, the Jola founded new Muslim villages, existing settlements changed their names to reflect their new religious identity, new forms of dress and address were adopted and mosques began to be established throughout Casamance. By the mid-20th century, Islam had become a 'template for ethnic cooperation' between groups in the region (as elsewhere in Senegal), and Jola often built homes in existing Mandinka settlements, 'where they were accepted as fellow Muslims' (Nugent 2008: 943). There is a strong correspondence between Jola and religious (Muslim and Roman Catholic) allegiances in Senegal. Both religions overlie and blend with strong and vibrant Jola *awasen* (indigenous religious) practices physically based on spirit shrines and sacred areas of forest forbidden to outsiders. *Awasen* is characterised by an openness to change and Jola have always borrowed ideas and practices from religions such as Islam and Christianity (Linares 1985; Baum 1986; Dellenborg 2007).

I undertook fieldwork in a village called Elounou[7] in the district of Kalounaye, a fertile strip of low-lying mangrove terrain on the shores of the Soungrougrou River in Middle Casamance. In this so-called 'Mandingised' region of the Kalounaye, social relations are consequently quite hierarchical, with effects on the cropping system, division of labour and gender relations as a whole (Linares 1992). From the Mandinka, these Jola groups acquired cash cropping, in the form of the commercial farming of groundnuts, which brought about a shift in power relations over time, with major effects on the way in which production has been organised by age and gender, kin and class. This process of the Jola 'becoming more like Mandinka' involved increased social differentiation, smaller household units, the creation of two separate farming systems (cash and subsistence crops, with men associated with the former and women, the latter, especially rice

[7] Name of village has been changed.

cultivation), and more secular and explicit authority roles (Linares 1985, 1992). As elsewhere, the complex historical and cultural transformations in Casamance are not simply the direct 'unproblematic consequences of world market forces or capitalist relations of production' (Linares 1992: 7). Instead, these changes are a result of the 'often contradictory ways in which ideological practices have negotiated between old practices and economic opportunities' (ibid.).

Tostan works in all regions of Senegal, and with all ethnic groups, some of which practise FGC, and some of which do not. My decision to undertake fieldwork among the 'Mandingised' Jola in Elounou was influenced by the fact that in contrast to the dominant (external) view that FGC is a very ancient traditional custom in practising African societies, the Jola have only relatively recently adopted *excision*, and it was young women themselves who had actively embraced its adoption in opposition to the will of their elders, thereby diverging from the hegemonic view of FGC as something forced upon women, presumably by men.

Elounou is a mid-sized village of over 1,000 people. The majority of the village's residents are Jola, who speak the Fonyi dialect, with a significant minority of Mandinka, and some Fulani. Although the Mandinka are in the physical minority in Elounou, it is a typically 'Mandingised' Jola village of the Kalounaye with the significant influence of Mandinka cultural values evident in the way that compounds are organised according to Mandinka gender and age hierarchy, as well as the gender division of labour according to which rice cultivation for subsistence was typically the work of women, while men cultivated cash crops, such as groundnuts. The Mandinka influence is also notable in that female *excision* is a norm in Elounou, as in other villages in the region (Dellenborg 2007). Many of the Jola in Elounou speak Mandinka, and the Fonyi dialect spoken in the village is peppered with words from the Mandinka language. For example, elderly women are referred to as *iñam* (the Mandinka word for 'mother'), the female initiation ritual is known by the Mandinka term *ñakay* and many related terms, such as 'leader of the initiation' (*kuyamansa*) are Mandinka words. Similar to the Wolof spoken in the north of Senegal, the Jola Fonyi spoken in Elounou is suffused with the Arabic language (especially greetings and blessings), and the word for FGC (*sunay*), is derived from the Arabic *sunnah* (literally meaning a clear or well-trodden path), denoting the prescriptions of the prophet Mohammed.

Agriculture is the main economic activity, although agricultural production is on the decline with recurrent droughts over the previous ten years, and many of the village's youth migrate for work

to The Gambia, Dakar and abroad. Home to a *campement* (tourist camp site) built with French donor funds, the village welcomes the occasional tourist, and despite the lack of electricity at the time of my fieldwork, there was an unreliable Internet connection at the local school (powered by the sporadic electrical generator) and a mobile phone mast offering a powerful signal to the Orange phone network. The nascent tourist activity suffered from lack of resources and promotion, and I met no tourists in Elounou during my time there. I did briefly encounter other Europeans however, as the village is home to two French households. These families spend the northern winter months in the village, living in relative luxury (both houses had powerful electrical generators, and one had a swimming pool). They had become acquainted with Elounou by way of its '*jumelage*' (twinning) with two towns in Normandy, set up almost 20 years prior. Many of the French 'partners' had visited the village and some of the villagers had visited France in exchange. These relationships had yielded a number of projects and infrastructure including a new school building (as well as a scholarship aimed at 'keeping girls in school'), a bridge (known as Pont Fleury in honour of its French origins), a spirulina farm, and the setting up of a water project aimed at supplying running water, through 'solidarity financing.'

Over time, I learned that these were just a few of the numerous and varied development projects that had taken place in the village in the decade prior. Some of those that I heard of included health education from Africare; a seed fair organised by Catholic Relief Services; a project for the management of used batteries; a solar cooking project; wood stoves and an oven for making bread (never used); a campsite for tourists, a kindergarten, and a library (all funded by the French *jumelage*); an Italian NGO that no-one remembered the name of that offered a market gardening project; Oceanium, a Senegalese NGO that works to combat the demise of the mangroves in Casamance; various visits from a UNICEF representative from Ziguinchor to discuss maternal health and HIV/AIDS; a literacy initiative; and of course, the Tostan 'Community Empowerment Program.'

The village had no electricity supply at the time of my fieldwork, although electrical poles were dotted hopefully around the streets. Homes were lit at night with gas lamps and candles and meals were cooked over charcoal and wood fires and on special occasions, gas burners. Bintou, my host 'mother' in the village, informed me that '*le courant*' would certainly be connected before the end of that year (2009). It was finally connected in 2013, the only village in the *communauté rurale* to achieve this. The village is situated on a dusty, bumpy, secondary road, two hours from the regional city of Ziguinchor, offering a stunning view through retreating mangroves, lush rice

fields and leafy mango and palm trees.

I had already spent short periods in Casamance prior to this six-month period of research in Kalounaye in 2009, and was initially introduced to the village of Elounou by a Tostan programme manager, an expatriate who described it as a 'model village' with regard to implementation of the Tostan programme. The choice of this village therefore posed an opportunity and a dilemma for me as an anthropologist wishing to study the social dynamics of the Tostan programme. As a 'model village,' Elounou offered the opportunity to assess how 'success' is interpreted by Tostan; as well as other potential areas of fruitful inquiry. However, my introduction to the villagers by the Tostan manager (who at the time was accompanied on the visit by his parents on holiday from Europe) risked cementing the idea in their minds that I was an '*agent de Tostan*' who was perhaps coming to see if they had 'really' abandoned FGC. Understanding that this may become part of my identity, I decided to stay in Elounou, after being invited to live with the village's *infirmier chef de poste* (ICP, or district nurse), Ousmane Diouf, a Sereer from the northern region of Kaolack who had been posted to the region 20 years previously.

As one of the largest villages in the area, Elounou had both a public primary and secondary school, as well as the government-administered health post run by Ousmane. The latter consisted of a sparsely furnished three-room building, with a dusty, rarely used desk in the consultation room, a few plastic chairs, some aged health information posters on the wall, an examination table, a delivery room (bare save for a PVC-covered birthing table) and a small solar-powered refrigerator. The adobe-walled, tin-roofed house provided for the ICP's family, a small shed, and an outhouse, shaded by a large mango tree, completed the compound. Although undoubtedly lacking in medical equipment, I was nonetheless surprised to observe that the *poste de santé* seemed underused by the local population, especially given the size of the village and its environs. I saw less than twenty patients pass through for consultation or treatment in my months there. These included some women who had come to give birth, a young man barely able to walk as he battled the chills of a malarial fever, and a few mothers with sickly, coughing children. A smart-looking motorcycle supplied by the health district was parked in front of the house, but was never moved as it was in disrepair, and there was no money to run it anyway, Ousmane told me.

A wiry man of fifty, Ousmane was usually to be found with his portable radio glued to his ear,

and a cigarette perched between his lips, sitting on the roots of the huge *saana*[8] tree outside the *fank* (compound, in Jola), and we would discuss current affairs together over glasses of sweet, frothy *attaaya* (tea). Ousmane valued formal education highly and was an avid listener of Radio France Internationale (RFI), which had clearly influenced his perspective on Africa's place in the world. Ousmane was proud of the scientific knowledge he had gained from his training as ICP. He had an excellent memory, and would squat under the massive *saana* tree in the village square, his spare frame shirtless in the muggy July heat, staring upwards as he puffed on a cigarette, reciting from memory the textbook causes, symptoms and treatments of illnesses such as malaria, yellow fever and diarrhoea. I would sit at his feet with the two young visiting student nurses from the hospital in the regional city of Ziguinchor, as we listened and nodded respectfully.

Ousmane's wife, Bintou Traoré, adopted me quickly after I came to live with them, referring to me from the beginning as '*sama doom*' ('my child,' in Wolof). An amicable woman in her early 40s with an easy smile, Bintou was a Mandinka from Ziguinchor, who had come to live in Elounou following marriage to Ousmane. She and Ousmane spoke Wolof among themselves and with their children, and Jola with the other villagers. Bintou was a local women's leader, head of the women's microfinance group, and had been the president of the Tostan Community Management Committee when the programme was held in the village, two years before I came to stay with them. In contrast to most families in the village, the Diouf household was not involved in rice cultivation, although Ousmane owned some land on the edge of the village where he had built a compound to house the schoolteachers, from which he received a rental income in addition to his ICP salary. Bintou was a skilled seamstress and could often be found sitting with her sewing machine outside the house, stitching and embroidering dresses to order for special occasions. The couple had two adult sons, living in nearby Bignona, and Dakar, and their compound in the village was home to a rotating family of young nieces, nephews, and cousins, all referred to as their children. Shortly after I arrived in Elounou, another teenage relative came to stay: Sokhna, the daughter of Bintou's sister, who had been sent to live with them from a large Mandinka village in Upper Casamance. Sokhna was 17 years old, unmarried, and seven months pregnant, and was to stay with Ousmane and Bintou until she had given birth, as she had been banished by her family who were ashamed of her pregnancy.

[8] *Saana* is the Jola name for what the French call a *fromager* tree, of the genus *ceiba*, a family of huge trees with a straight, mostly branchless trunk that culminates in a huge, spreading canopy, with massive roots that can be taller than a grown person.

Apart from the Diouf household, I came to know many of the inhabitants of the village over the period I spent there, particularly the mostly middle-aged and elderly women participants in Bintou's weekly 'Tostan classes,' held in the afternoon at the schoolhouse, as well as many of the village '*intellectuels*,' in particular some of the schoolteachers. I was also well acquainted with the Tostan staff based in the city of Ziguinchor (who would visit the village occasionally), having worked with them in 2007-2008 when I was a volunteer with the organisation.

As discussed below, my position in this milieu was rather complex. Ousmane and Bintou were always kind and welcoming to me, but I knew that they associated me with Tostan, as I had been introduced to them by a Tostan staff member. I realised that this no doubt had implications for our relationship. From my point of view, their position in the village, as the family of a man as important as Ousmane (Bintou herself was a very important leader among the village women, who would often break into spontaneous song in her honour at their gatherings) meant that I could learn much from this cosmopolitan family, who spoke French, Jola, Wolof and Mandinka. However, over time I observed that they were at pains to reinforce the 'official' narrative of the village's experience with Tostan. The couple's relationship with Tostan was clearly a product of their long experience with other NGOs, as well as representatives of the government and other visitors to the village. They were also always very quick to dismiss or speak hazily about the practice of *sunay* (FGC) in their village, probably due to its illegality, and the general condemnation of it by outsiders. I could see that they were also (understandably) somewhat unsure about my purpose in their village. I explained to them that I was a student of anthropology, and that I wished to understand better everyday life in a place that had experienced the Tostan programme.

## Fieldwork in Dakar

Following fieldwork in Casamance, I was a 'participant observer' in Tostan's Dakar office over a nine-month period (2009-2010). This followed on from my original stint as a volunteer intern in Thiès (with occasional visits to the Dakar office) in 2007-2008. By the time my fieldwork began in Dakar in 2009, I had had experience of the organisation from a number of different perspectives. I had also built strong connections with many of the Tostan staff, with whom I had worked over a period of some years. My position as a returning volunteer-turned-researcher was also characterised by a certain liminality, but I was generally accepted as a member of the team, and I participated in all aspects of daily office life, while living in a *chambre de passage* in the

house provided for Tostan volunteers and others passing through. Over the months that followed, I attended meetings at WHO and UNICEF country offices. I met visiting activists from Europe and the United States, who were devoting their time, money and energy to bringing about the end of what they considered to be 'female genital mutilation' and had come to learn from or promote the 'on-the-ground' experience and apparent success of Tostan. In this environment I also encountered and discussed with other social researchers, both local and international.

Although I largely draw on data for this thesis from direct experience and observation in different locales, in Chapter 5 (focusing on Tostan's founder and Director, Molly Melching), I also draw to a significant extent on published (and public) statements and actions by the Director. This approach was partly taken due to the fact that Melching was often abroad as part of her work for Tostan, and thus my personal interactions with her were generally limited to superficial greetings at the office, observations at staff meetings and staff accounts of their experiences working with her (as well as an in-depth formal interview carried out in January 2011). It was also a conscious choice on my part to focus on published materials produced by or about Tostan's Director (including online video of her appearances at international conferences or award ceremonies), in order to analyse the public narratives she produced and maintained, as a key element of her role as the organisation's founder and Executive Director.

In Dakar, I also spent time with the young, mostly American, volunteers with the organisation, and was frequently mistaken for one of them by visitors and donors. As I explore in Chapter 6, many of these young people were spending their summer vacation or gap year in Senegal, with varying motivations: some filled with a belief in the mission of development and human rights education; some to enhance their CVs for their law school applications back home or to kick-start a career as a development worker; and some to enjoy the expatriate life in an 'exotic' foreign country. For many it was a combination of these and other complex motivations. I further enhanced relationships with the Dakar staff, learning about the relations between these two groups, sometimes marked by conflict, and often by misunderstanding. I lunched with visiting donors from large international philanthropic organisations. I saw where the money was coming from to fund the Tostan programme, and how the programme was represented to these powerful, wealthy, usually well-meaning people when they came to visit. Unsurprisingly, I found that in this milieu of international development actors, my citizenship and White racial identity contributed to my status as an 'insider,' in contrast to my previous experiences in Casamance and in Thiès, giving me a fresh perspective as well as considerable pause for thought on the political

nature of my position and the tensions related to the often 'insider/outsider' nature of the role of the ethnographer of development (Mosse 2005: xii), discussed below.

## Affinity, anxiety, and awkwardness: fieldwork and position of the researcher

As David Mosse observes, a key aspect of the 'new ethnography of development' is that it is increasingly 'multi-*positioned*, as well as multi-sited,' as anthropologists research 'not just in, but as *part of*, donor policy-making bodies, project meetings, village events' etc. (Mosse 2005: 11, emphasis in original). He argues that the consequent blurring of boundaries between 'field' and 'home' involves:

> Exploring a new kind of anthropology, one which situates the production of knowledge about other people, and places it explicitly within the framework of international relations, analysing the political and historical relations of power, and the systems of values which shape representations. Moreover, it does so in a way that places the anthropologist within this frame, and turns a self-critical lens onto the anthropologist-actor as member of a transnational community, speaking from within and in the first person. (ibid.)

Within this context, I briefly outline my own history and position in relation to this research project and the different 'communities' I describe in this thesis (ibid.).

In early 2006, I was a 27-year-old drawn rather indirectly towards anthropological study subsequent to departing my native Ireland six years before to live and work in Europe, Asia, and Australia. Gravitating towards the discipline following these experiences living in different societies, I began a Master's degree in 'applied anthropology' in Australia focused on 'gender and development,' to which I was attracted due to a general ideological commitment to issues of feminism and social justice, as I understood them. Prior to this, I had come across the concept of 'female genital mutilation' (FGM) only here and there: via *The White Masai*, for example, a film set in Kenya that touched on the topic from the perspective of its German heroine. Here, FGM was conceived as a bloody, barbaric, incomprehensible act of 'tradition.' As the term implied, the mutilation was nasty and senseless, and perhaps, grimly fascinating.

Unfamiliar with the subject or the context, my initial thoughts on the matter were superficial and fairly stereotypical, framed around a general curiosity as to why would people 'do' such a thing to girl children (to their own daughters, indeed), putting them through needless suffering and injury, and perhaps, risking their death. From all accounts, it seemed that FGM was an

anachronistic practice, reminiscent of the mythical chastity belts of the Middle Ages, and merited equal condemnation. Most intriguingly, however (to me), the topic of FGM appeared to pose an interesting theoretical challenge to the cherished Boasian principle of cultural relativism to which we were introduced in class: Aud Talle describes its study in Africa and beyond as 'the anthropology of a difficult issue,' as it both commands and confronts the conventional cultural relativistic approach (Talle 2007: 91).

Posing one of the strongest challenges to anthropology's chief tenet, FGM has indeed emerged as a 'central moral topic' of contemporary anthropology: 'no area of the discipline seems so entwined with ethical claims, activism, and the participation of governmental and non-governmental organizations' (Silverman 2004: 427-8). In-class debates on the topic were laced with a generous dose of postcolonial, politically correct reflexivity that nonetheless tended to begin and end with the conclusion that FGM was at best foolish and unpleasant, and at worst misogynistic and backward: a straightforward example of the patriarchal scourge of 'violence against women' and an impediment to 'progress' (Bunch 1997), illustrative of women's subordination across time and space. Exposure to these discourses prompted me to the view that a certain amount of 'epistemological distrust' (Rist 2008: 3) was in order due to the 'colonial continuities' (Heron 1999: iii) manifest within the racialised Othering characterising these narratives, dominated as they were by outsider opponents, who condemned the practices as straightforward examples of 'mutilation' and 'torture' ascribed to 'culture,' or 'patriarchy' (e.g. Hosken 1979).

Absorbed by the fairly abstract questions engendered by this topic within contemporary development debates, I trawled through the vast literature within 'an extremely contested field [wherein] debates are largely structured on the basis of Western concerns' (Dellenborg 2007: 3). This process brought me to learn of the NGO Tostan and its 'breakthrough' in Senegal in convincing practitioners to definitively 'abandon FGC' (Easton et al. 2003; 2009). Subsequently making the contested ideas around FGC and Tostan's approach to its abandonment the focus of my MA thesis (Ní Mhórdha 2007), I travelled to Senegal following graduation in 2007 to work with Tostan as a volunteer intern (in this role finding myself unremarkable as one of many other 'volunteers' of similar cultural and educational background with an interest in FGC, a milieu I examine in Chapter 6 of this thesis). Having deferred my place to study for a doctorate in social anthropology to undergo this experience as an independent 'volunteer,' following a six-month stint in Senegal, I began PhD research in Scotland, with Tostan again as my subject. I returned to Senegal in 2009 for a 15-month period of multi-sited fieldwork aimed at gaining a deeper

understanding of the NGO, initially framed around a general curiosity about the cultural dynamics of how its project experienced success in effectuating the relinquishment of FGC among target communities.

Michael Lambek's paper, *Pinching the Crocodile's Tongue,* exploring 'the complex pulls between affinity and anxiety that characterize our relations with others,' concludes that fieldwork is 'an intensely moral activity in the Aristotelian sense' (Lambek 1997: 32). As indicated above, in both of my field 'sites,' my presence, and indeed persona, was characterised by the ambiguity and liminality of the insider/outsider, and induced within me feelings of awkwardness and frequent uneasiness. In rural Casamance, I was acutely aware of my nebulous position as a foreign *anthropologue*, or what often struck me as being, a 'serious and sophisticated tourist, but a tourist nonetheless' (Frankland 2001: 238, discussing Crick's 'anthropologist as tourist') and perceived agent of the NGO I was attempting to research.

Furthermore, I came to find myself uncomfortable with my initial uninterrogated belief in, and my village interlocutors' unquestioning acceptance of, the validity and appropriateness of my presence as a foreign researcher in their village and in their lives. Increasingly conscious through this fieldwork experience of the reality of anthropology's historical and contemporary role as the 'handmaiden of colonialism' (an expression popularised by Talal Asad [1973]), coupled with related critiques of the part played by anthropologists in the contemporary development 'encounter' (see Escobar 1991; 1995), my position within the intersection of anthropology and development brought to mind an 'awkwardness' not dissimilar to that famously described by Marilyn Strathern as characterising the relationship between anthropology and feminism (Strathern 1987). I was deeply affected by the warmth and generosity of the family who welcomed me into their home, and, despite cultural, economic and linguistic disparities, I personally felt a sense of affinity with the community I lived in, as the morning cockcrow and the gathering of seasonal crops transported me back to my own rural childhood. However, living among people who had experienced countless interventions by outsiders in their lives in the name of 'development' (be they governmental or non-governmental actors), and who were consequently used to being studied, surveyed and monitored, I was confronted with the reality that, irrespective of labels, I was another actor in the theatre of development that had been imposed on their lives, and that my 'right' to be there, unquestioned by all (including myself, initially), was instituted by the very systems of domination and inequality that justified the development intervention in the first place.

Adding to my growing dissonance at my own presence in the community was villagers' awareness that I was associated specifically with Tostan, an organisation known to combat *excision*, leading to an unspoken assumption on their part that I was there to scrutinise them in relation to this topic, perhaps to interrogate whether they had 'really' abandoned it following exposure to Tostan's programme. Bamford and Robbins (1995: 96) observe that within an emerging context of 'transnational and global inter-connectedness' the ethnographer encounters the 'changing ethical conditions presented by fieldwork,' noting that 'the growing volume and import of global connections created by the flow of people, technologies, and cultural meanings render problematic the traditional status of the field worker.' These authors argue that 'anthropologists are now more likely to be understood by the people they study as themselves a significant part of the global flow—perhaps a part that heralds desired changes' (ibid.), a point I explore later in this chapter.

A further tension I experienced during multi-sited fieldwork was related to undertaking 'ethnography from within' (Mosse 2005: 11). Carrying out ethnographic research as an 'insider' within the organisation while based in the Dakar office, I found that as a former member of Tostan's 'Monitoring and Evaluation' team, the assumption on the part of my interlocutors within Tostan management was that my research would offer a contribution to improving programme performance vis-à-vis beneficiaries and the organisation itself. I was grateful for the full access I was given within Tostan, and indeed the welcome I received as a returning member of the organisational 'family' in 2009. Added to this, due to the understanding and affinity I often felt for the expatriate volunteers whose identity had originally been my own within the organisation, and the friendships I had built up with local staff, 'fieldwork' in my case often felt as if it were taking place on the 'blurred borders between ethnography and life' (Leibing 2007: 139). Indeed, returning to university in Scotland in 2010 at the end of my official period of fieldwork, I found it very difficult to disentangle my 'life' from the period of research I had just undertaken. With the benefit of time and physical distance, I began to reflect on this experience more clearly, coming to an understanding of the ways in which my perspective, and others' perspectives of me (regarding who I was and what I was doing), shifted according to the locale of my fieldwork. Notwithstanding my own shifting outlook, among my peers at Tostan, I was largely viewed as an 'applied anthropologist'[9] or even an 'activist anthropologist'; many appeared to assume that I was interested in studying FGC in isolation as a cultural practice, or solely its practitioners, with the

[9] 'Applied anthropology' involves 'the use of the methods and theories of anthropology to solve the practical problems of human communities' (van Willigen 2002: ix).

aim of contributing to the organisation's efforts to halt its practice. Similar to Laura Agustín's role as an ethnographer of workers and activists within the sex trade in Spain, 'my position in the field was a mix of insider, outsider, stakeholder, political actor and researcher-with-a-self-interest, and shifted according to the conditions of the moment' (Agustín 2007a: 141). In some ways, I found that, likewise, 'my shifting position helped me understand everyone a bit better' (ibid.).

Significantly, my experiences in Senegal with Tostan over a period of four years had fundamentally altered my own perspectives on the world. Turning a critical ethnographic eye (discussed below) on the milieu of development and its actors (including on myself as both a volunteer and researcher), I came to understand the cultural dynamics of Tostan as a donor-driven development organisation situated within a globalised political economy and culture of neoliberalism, causing me to further shift my 'questioning gaze' (Agustín 2007a: 135) away from the culture of the practitioners of FGC, to the culture of those 'helping' them. As I explore in this thesis, through long-term fieldwork I came to understand the success of the Tostan project, in contrast to its primary image as an innovative model of 'grassroots' development, as achieved primarily through 'materially mediated *heterotopic spectacles*' (Allen 2013: 2, emphasis in original) by a variety of actors across the organisation.

Mosse notes that ethnographers of development, in particular, 'know that they are neither "shielded from the complicated negotiations of social life" nor "absolved from assuming an implicated responsibility for their words, images and actions" [Stoller 1994: 357],' arguing that for the ethnographic writer of development, 'not only the author, but the book itself is uncomfortably part of the world it describes' (Mosse 2005: xii). Similarly, I faced analytical and ethical dilemmas in writing critically about an organisation within which I had been deeply embedded and one which, as an NGO, is viewed as 'doing good,' a key component in its bid to access funding and representation (Hilhorst 2003: 7). Producing my own narrative from a position of liminality within an organisation for which the construction and maintenance of particular narratives is a major preoccupation, coupled with the decision to study 'across' and 'up,' in an environment where 'studying down' (Nader 1972) is the norm, I came to 'value my shadow' within the 'blurred boundaries between ethnography and life' (Leibing and McLean 2007: 1). In doing so, I hope to follow Leibing and McLean's characterisation of 'the researcher [who] may […] seek to examine a troubling, perhaps unequal relationship, or bring attention to the power differentials under which prior knowledge was constructed' (ibid.: 2).

## The political economy of development in post-independence Senegal

I agree with Wolf's (1982) argument that anthropology must pay more attention to history, and Grinker's claim that anthropology cannot ignore it: 'the past conditions the present, and so the present must be understood as an isolated moment or a "slice of time" in what is a much broader and more complex process of change' (Grinker 2010: 10). Any understanding of current development interventions in Senegal requires familiarity with its history and political economy as part of the linking of the 'interpretive project of modern anthropology to a historical understanding of the large-scale social and economic structures' in which poverty is embedded (Farmer 2004: 305). For this reason, I include historical and political analysis in this introduction, aimed at framing the 'ethnographic present' of field research within a larger picture of historical politics and processes. As Paul Farmer (ibid.: 308) puts it:

> Anthropological inquiry often starts with current events and the ethnographically visible […] Without a historically deep and geographically broad analysis, one that takes into account political economy, we risk seeing only the residue of meaning […] Both parts of this explanatory duty—the geographically broad and the historically deep—are critical.

With this in mind, I offer here a brief historical sketch of the political economy of post-independence Senegal, highlighting the role of IMF/World Bank-led 'development' reforms in creating the country's current dependence on external aid, as well as the implantation of pervasive and powerful cultural ideas about poverty, health and individual rights and responsibilities in a country where ordinary people are 'precariously balanced on the twin precipices of crumbling health systems and economic decline' (Foley 2010: 3). This historical outline shows how the problems and paradoxes of poverty and health in Senegal 'stem from the encounter between market-based health policies and local social and political systems that are rife with inequalities' (ibid.), suggesting that this situation provides the conceptual framework and legitimation for NGOs such as Tostan, whose aim is to engender 'sustainable development' though 'positive social transformation' (Tostan 2014a).

In the years following its independence from France in 1960, Senegal experienced some economic prosperity, based on its agricultural sector and the strength of its exports. However by the mid-1970s, a succession of droughts coupled with a series of external shocks prompted an economic downturn across the region, and a financial crisis, giving the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank the opportunity to offer 'loan relief' in tandem with the introduction of policies of liberalisation and private sector development (Daffé and Diop 2004). As one of the first countries to experiment with these institutions' 'Structural Adjustment

Programmes' (SAPs), which have since come to dominate economic policy across sub-Saharan Africa (and indeed globally), the Senegalese economy underwent policy reforms to reduce fiscal deficits, liberalise trade and investment and de-regulate domestic markets (ibid.). Measures central to the implementation of the so-called Washington Consensus[10] emerging in the 1980s, included moves such as the devaluation of the CFA franc (originally fixed in value to the French franc and currently to the Euro) in 1994, affecting the eight member states of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), of which Senegal is a member. This 50% devaluation of the currency, justified as a measure to increase exports, had the effect of instantly halving the purchasing power of ordinary people, while simultaneously doubling national debt without improving the country's ability to make repayments, a move which some local commentators, such as Sakho (2001) attribute as a major factor in Senegal's subsequent economic decline.[11]

The liberalisation and austerity measures behind these SAPs, whose requirements include higher export levels, deregulation and radical cutbacks in government spending, entailed a number of deeply destructive economic shocks in Senegal, resulting in the decimation of real incomes, huge cuts in state spending and an even greater shift in agricultural production from food crops to cash crops. Economist Demba Moussa Dembele argues that, far from ridding Senegal of its debt burdens, these policies aggravated the problem:

> The deepening of the debt burden ran in parallel with the deterioration of the economic and social situation, due in large part to the numerous policy conditions attached to loans

[10] As O'Brien and Williams (2007: 224) explain, the term 'Washington Consensus' was 'coined to capture the agreement upon economic policy that was shared between the two major international financial institutions in Washington (the IMF and the World Bank) and the US government itself. This consensus stipulated that the best path to economic development was through financial and trade liberalisation and that international institutions should persuade countries to adopt such measures as quickly as possible.'

[11] A legacy of de Gaulle's *Pacte Colonial*, which enshrined a special preference for France in the political, commercial and defence processes of its former colonies, the CFA zone monetary policy is operated by the French Treasury, without reference to the central fiscal authorities of any of the WAEMU member states. The Central Bank of each WAEMU member state is obliged to keep at least 65% of its foreign exchange reserves in an 'operations account' held at the French Treasury in Paris, as well as a further 20% to cover financial liabilities (The Economist 2002). Member states do not know, nor are they told, how much of the pool of foreign reserves held by the French Treasury belongs to them as a group or individually. This effectively makes it impossible for countries such as Senegal to regulate their own monetary policy and each is affected by the relative prudence or wastefulness of the other members, with no opportunity for meaningful intervention. In addition, currency devaluation can easily be once more imposed, and there have been several devaluation 'scares' since 1994. In fact, friends in Senegal reported to me at the end of 2011 that a rumour was going around at the time that the CFA franc was to be halved in value again in January 2012 because of France's indebtedness and the economic problems of the Eurozone. These fears of devaluation turned out to be groundless, but caused some panic at the time.

> made by the IMF and the World Bank. Sweeping trade liberalisation and deregulation combined with the dismantling of the Senegalese public sector, from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, led to the collapse of both the agricultural and industrial sectors. The agricultural sector, which employs more than 70 per cent of the population, has been severely affected by liberalisation and the dissolution of many state controlled enterprises (known as parastatals). As a result, peasants and small-scale farmers have seen their livelihoods deteriorate in the face of the invasion of the domestic market by cheap and subsidised imports from developed countries. (Dembele 2003: 7-8)

As Daffé and Diop (2004: 271) note, 'structural adjustment affects a country's social and political environment.' Neoliberal reforms, said to promise great prosperity, instead had devastating consequences in terms of poverty and inequality in Senegal, as the absolute number of people living in poverty increased, coupled with an increasing disparity between rich and poor (Duruflé 1994).[12]

An example of the social effects of structural adjustment policies lies in the ubiquitous Senegalese tea ritual, the serving of *attaaya*. *Attaaya* is consumed everywhere in Senegal: in homes, on street pavements, in *boutiques* (tiny neighbourhood shops), in offices, and at all times of the day or night. Most often people appreciate the hot, sweet drink after lunch, especially following dishes such as the rich *maafe* (rice and usually meat in a peanut sauce), as well as the typical *ceebu jen* dish of rice and fish. Largely the domain of younger men, the brewing of the foamy *attaaya* takes place in three rounds, served in small Maghreb-style drinking glasses, called *kas*. The first round, (*lewel)*, is strong and bitter, the second (*nyarel*) is sweeter, with mint, and the third round (*nyettel*) is the sweetest and weakest of the three. Taking up to three hours to complete the three rounds, the ritual is a highly social one as, surrounded by others, the tea-maker carefully and skilfully prepares the right quantities of water, tea and sugar in his small *brada* (teapot), bringing it to the boil over a gas or charcoal *fourneau*. On removing the *brada* from the heat, he then pours some of the content into each of four small *kas* and then proceeds to pour the liquid back and forth between the glasses from a great height, until each glass has produced a thick layer of foam at the top. Keeping the foam in the glasses, he then pours the thick, steaming liquid back into the *brada* and brings the tea to the boil again, eventually serving a foamy round

[12] Saad-Filho and Johnston (2004: 3) define neoliberalism as 'a particular organisation of capitalism, which has evolved to protect capital(ism) and to reduce the power of labour. This is achieved by means of social, economic and political transformations imposed by internal forces as well as external pressure' and involves the 'use of foreign aid, debt relief and balance of payments support to promote the neoliberal programme, and diplomatic pressure, political unrest and military intervention when necessary.' Neoliberalism is thus 'part of a hegemonic project concentrating power and wealth in elite groups around the world, benefiting especially the financial interests within each country, and US capital internationally' (ibid.: 1).

of tea in the small glasses, rinsed in a nearby bucket and re-used as each guest finishes. I noticed that it was quite common for people to serve only the first two, or for guests to leave after the second glass. Considering the general reverence and enjoyment with which people treated the drinking of tea, I was curious and asked Ousmane once, about why people did not always serve the third *attaaya,* and he informed me that this practice dated to 1994. Why 1994, I asked? He replied that when the CFA franc was devalued in 1994, people began to stop serving the third (sweetest) *attaaya*, which contained two full cups of sugar, to save the cost of the daily ritual. Although the third glass is still served on many occasions, Ousmane said, people don't usually expect it any more, and a guest's obligation is fulfilled after staying for the *nyarel*.

Following twenty years of implementation of IMF and World Bank policies, including the 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc, in June 2000, Senegal entered into the IMF's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries scheme, with debt relief contingent on further 'structural conditions,' such as increased investment deregulation and the privatisation of state enterprises. In the same year, the UN added Senegal to its list of 'Least Developed Countries' (LDC) (United Nations 2014). Susan George argues in *How the Poor Develop the Rich,* that 'failures' such as this are not in fact failures if one takes the view that the goal of the Bretton-Woods institutions is in reality 'to squeeze the debtors dry, to transfer enormous resources from South to North' (George 1997: 207). Viewed thus, she maintains, their policies have been an 'unqualified success,' as the OECD creditor countries who are the major stockholders of the IMF and World Bank have and continue to benefit immensely from the resource transfers and deregulated investment opportunities offered by the SAPs (ibid.). She points out that in just eight years (1982-1990), debtor countries globally 'deprived their people […] of basic necessities in order to provide the private banks and the public agencies of the rich with the equivalent of six Marshall Plans' through debt service alone (ibid.: 209).

Debtor country political and corporate elites have had little cause for complaint with this scenario. In Senegal for example, elites have benefited from plummeting wages, weakened trade unions, and measures such as the 1994 CFA devaluation, as those with holdings in foreign currencies automatically became twice as rich at home. As public services deteriorate under ongoing structural adjustment policies, the wealthy (including government officials) can always access expensive private services such as health and education; in Senegal as elsewhere, neoliberal reforms have resulted in a massive decline in investment in government provision of these services. Discussing the politics of health in Senegal, Ellen Foley argues that, 'in the

Senegalese case, reforms based in utilitarian and liberal frameworks can actually exacerbate existing social inequalities and reinforce underlying health inequities […] paying no attention to the social and economic costs of adjustment being borne by the most vulnerable populations' (Foley 2010: 63). Critical reflection on these 'efficiency-driven' health policies reveals the 'moral underpinnings of health reform,' which Foley maintains, are representative of liberalism's focus on 'rights and opportunities' and consequent emphasis on individual 'choices' (ibid.: 62). She argues that:

> The responsibilization discourse has been fully incorporated into state and NGO rhetoric about overcoming Senegal's health challenges. Implicit in this idea of "becoming responsible" is the liberal assumption that individuals are rational and conscious decision makers whose health actions are unfettered by social or cultural constraints. This image of the freely acting 'neoliberal subject' has been inherent to the logic of market-based health reforms. (Foley 2010: 96)

Implicit and explicit appeals for 'responsibilization' and 'empowerment' of citizenry and a 'new partnership between the state and citizens' in relation to health and education have thus become part of both official and NGO discourse in Senegal (ibid.: 61). As Julie Hearn notes, contemporary aid policy in Africa is dominated by the 'New Policy Agenda of neoliberalism and liberal democratic theory, which assigns NGOs a key role' (Hearn 1998: 89), creating the socio-political conditions for the emergence and dominance of NGOs such as Tostan as the primary agents in defining and addressing the problems facing people in Senegal.

## A critical ethnography of a development and human rights project

The cumulative effects of punishing, externally imposed economic policies and spending cutbacks, and the repeated mantra of the need for the elusive '*développement*' on everything from t-shirts to billboards, accompanied by integration into an increasingly globalised society and the proliferation of NGOs across the country, have seen the emergence of the development industry in Senegal as a major political and cultural force. The present study is grounded within this industry, offering an analysis located within the tradition of critical ethnography, which Jim Thomas refers to as 'a way of applying a subversive worldview to the conventional logic of cultural inquiry' (Thomas 1993: vii). It intends to offer an unashamedly political ethnographic analysis of a milieu whose slogans include 'participation' 'human rights' and 'democracy'; concepts which have largely been voided of their political meaning and more often than not provide the means and justification for the entrenchment and reproduction of existing power

relations (see White 1996; Elliott 2009). In addition, I understand the term 'critique' 'in its 'Kantian sense of free and public examination' rather than its typical sense of unfavourable judgement (Rist 2008: 3).

As discussed above, I began research into interventions against FGC in 2006, starting with the view that a certain amount of 'epistemological distrust' was in order (ibid.). This approach continued to inform my doctoral research and writing process, contributing to my interest in investigating how the normative ideas behind development programmes in general, and those targeting FGC in particular, have progressed from their 'Western origins' to their current status as a 'global faith' (Rist 2008). My study therefore involves a process of 'choosing between conceptual alternatives and making value-laden judgments of meaning and method to challenge research, policy, and other areas of human activity' (Thomas 1993: 4). Bearing in mind the foundational ethical principle of nonmaleficence that underpins field research, a responsibility that especially lies on the shoulders of the critical ethnographer, I hope to offer a 'conventional ethnography with a political purpose' (ibid.).

A number of previous studies have been undertaken about Tostan, largely focusing on its beneficiaries and/or programme outcomes, rather than on the NGO itself as a cultural and political institution. These include O'Neill's (2012) PhD thesis offering an ethnographic analysis of the politics of Futanke opposition to the law banning FGC (and Tostan as a movement within this), in the Fouta Toro region of Senegal. Cauble's (2009) MA thesis focused on the 'empowerment effects' of Tostan's 'nonformal' education programme. Diop et al.'s (2008) evaluation on behalf of the Population Council assessed the impacts of the Tostan programme on the 'daily lives' of participants, including a focus on FGC abandonment, reporting favourable results on the selected indicators, e.g. 'informants reported that the program improved knowledge of rights and responsibilities among both participating and non-participating women, particularly with respect to the place and role of women in the community' (Diop et al. 2008: ii). In addition, Tostan has been referred to extensively by scholars focusing on FGC (e.g. Johnson 2003; Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 2007; Shell-Duncan 2008; Shell-Duncan et al. 2010; Irvine 2011). Furthermore, Tostan's programme is the subject of a number of academic theories and models related to social change and education (e.g. Mackie 1996, 2000, 2009; Gillespie and Melching 2010; Bicchieri and Mercier 2014), explored in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Focusing on the politics and practices of Tostan's people as situated within the milieu of development, the present study incorporates and builds on existing anthropological accounts of

development, framed within a critical ethnographic tradition (e.g. Mosse 2005, 2011; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 2006; Fechter and Hindman 2011). The production and dissemination of discourses is an important component of the exercise and maintenance of power, as scholars such as Foucault (1980) and Saïd (1978) have demonstrated. Escobar argues that development, itself, has 'fulfilled this role admirably' through the professionalization and institutionalisation of the development paradigm (1988: 430-1). As Babb (2001) notes, notions such as 'underdevelopment' clearly have a concrete historical formation, and it is important to examine development as discourse in order to understand the systematic ways in which Northern countries have been able to 'manage and control and, in many ways, even create the Third World politically, economically, sociologically and culturally' (Escobar 1984: 384). Following Foucault, it is necessary to consider the dynamics of discourse, power, and knowledge within the development framework, particularly as they have been constructed in the 'First World' and imposed on the 'Third World' (Babb 2001). Viewed in this way, discourses of development have worked to consolidate the power of Northern countries as they constructed the problem of 'underdevelopment' and then set forth to build a mechanism to deal with it. However, my intention is not to limit the inquiry to a critical account of 'processes' nor to a rendering of development as 'discourse,' wherein anthropologists have 'tended to focus on these issues at an abstract level, portraying development as an ethically problematic enterprise' (Yarrow 2011: 42-43). Instead I aim to trace the discourses and socio-political practices embedded in the design, promotion and implementation of Tostan's 'Community Empowerment Program,' the objective of which is to promote social change based on specific interpretations of human rights and democracy.

With these aims in mind, the position of my social inquiry can be located somewhere between two of the three positions set forth by Jürgen Habermas: the historical and interpretive model, 'in which social phenomena are described and their meanings and functions further elaborated through the balanced commentary and philosophical descriptions of the reader'; and the critical theory model, in which 'social life is represented and analysed for the political purpose of overcoming social oppression, particularly forms that reflect advanced capitalism' (Habermas 1971, cited in Madison 2005: 7). Taking the view that Tostan, as a human rights NGO, is a 'moral political project,' I agree with Wendy Brown's understanding of human rights activism as 'a particular form of political power carrying a particular image of justice' and, in this spirit, aim to take up her challenge to 'to inspect, evaluate, and judge it as such' (Brown 2004: 453).

## Narrative production and the uses of knowledge and ignorance

As illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, the speeches of Tostan stakeholders at high profile 'Public Declarations' converge in harmony around the idea of enlightenment and advancement through the possession of correct, empowering information, with some even going so far as to declare that human rights doctrine has become the basis for all individual and community decision-making processes. In this way, the 'Public Declaration' is a key symbol of the success of the Tostan programme, as it helps the organisation to enrol the support of 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8) for its project. These groups of 'believers' (ibid.: 172) include philanthropic foundations, multilateral and bilateral development agencies, corporations, politicians, activists, potential and former volunteers, government officials, bureaucrats, other international NGOs, academics, and beneficiaries themselves.

My fieldnotes document numerous examples of Casamance villagers' publicly expressed delight at receiving the Tostan programme, and their firm commitments to abandoning social and cultural behaviours they had been told were harmful. Stakeholders across the spectrum of Tostan activities (be they recipient villagers, field staff, international volunteers, urban-based office staff, or the Director herself) speak the language of 'human rights talk' (Dembour 1996) fluently, in the process conveying images of partnership and self-determination. Tostan official discourse always refers to the villages in which it works as 'partner communities,' implying the equality and autonomy of those on both sides of the arrangement. However, as Maria Eriksson Baaz notes, the partnership terminology popular within contemporary development rhetoric 'underplays the power inequalities inherent in the aid relationship and gives no hint of the chasm between the partnership policy and day-to-day practices' (Eriksson Baaz 2005: 9). Dorothea Hilhorst (2003: 212) discusses donors' and NGOs' use of the language of partnership as a 'device for legitimation.' She outlines how the rhetoric of partnership conveys an idea of 'authenticity' and therefore 'legitimates' the organisation or project to donors, the public and other stakeholders. Stirrat and Henkel frame such partnerships (between NGO and their targets, and NGOs and their donors) as similar to the partnership of marriage, involving complementary and different identities: 'as with most marriages, the relationship is as much a site of struggle as a cause of harmony' (Stirrat and Henkel 1997: 76, in Hilhorst 2003: 211), and Hilhorst concludes that 'the nature of partnership and the roles and discretion of the partners involved are always under negotiation, and the way in which the partnership evolves reflects the power processes taking place' (ibid.). The need for development activities to be perceived as 'bottom-up' and 'participatory' rather than 'top-down' is therefore an ongoing challenge facing NGOs in the

contemporary funding environment wherein the political rhetoric emphasises the 'participation' of recipient groups (c.f. Mosse 2003; Cooke and Kothari 2001; White 1996). Quarles van Ufford writes about the tension between the overtly 'bottom-up' nature of a development project and its 'top-down' reality: 'the two vital elements for the success and continuity of the scheme were of course quite contradictory as the need for spending […] almost precluded the view of people at the local level being taken into account in the planning exercise. So this tension had to be resolved. The solution was found in the careful management of the information and images of the local scene' (Quarles van Ufford 1993: 136).

A key argument of this thesis is that an important activity for all stakeholders involved in the Tostan project is the strategic employment of knowledge and ignorance as part of the management of information and image, aimed at maintaining the necessary 'public fiction' (Geissler 2013: 28) of collaborative partnership and equality. The anecdotal evidence of the 'Public Declarations' described earlier reveals some of the fragmentations and contradictions within the narratives of different 'partners' of the Tostan project. The ex-cutters, for example, in one forum claimed to have abandoned FGC because of their new understanding of it as harmful, thanking Tostan for helping them to reach this conclusion, but in another forum, demanded financial compensation for the inconvenience of this change to their way of life. Demands such as these, which may have been known to various actors within the organisation, were not publicly discussed as they contradicted the official narrative of enlightened, grateful project beneficiaries.

As I will show, official 'unknowing' on the part of Tostan of the complex and often contradictory responses of project stakeholders is a key element of activities aimed at maintaining the rhetoric of partnership and collaboration on which its work is premised, as well as discourses of autonomy, freedom and choice. I argue that 'strategic ignorance' (Bailey 2007; McGoey 2012a) is a practice employed by a range of Tostan actors, including its founder, staff members and volunteers and programme participants, highlighting 'the value of ignorance in procuring more resources' (McGoey 2012a: 555). Knowledge and ignorance are not only practices employed by Tostan actors, but also moral phenomena that provide legitimacy and justification for the project intervention. Speaking about programme participants' stated abandonment of FGC, Tostan founder Molly Melching asserted in a 2011 radio interview in the United States that:

> It's not really the law that led to the abandonment, but rather people getting good information, it's not being imposed but rather letting them make the decision, understanding why it was critical for their health and for the well-being of all the girls in

> their community. And, we feel confident that those who did abandon, have really abandoned, and will not start again. (Tostan 2011b)

In this understanding, it is a given that ignorance of certain 'good information' is a de facto negative phenomenon and something that, 'social actors have an obvious interest in seeking to overcome or to eradicate' (McGoey 2012a: 554). However, as Nancy Tuana observes, 'ignorance is not just an omission or a gap, but can be an "active production"' (Tuana 2004: 195). Tuana argues that, 'tracing what is not known and the politics of such ignorance should be a key element of epistemological and social/political analyses, for it has the potential to reveal the role of power in the construction of what is known and to provide a lens for the political values at work in our knowledge practices' (ibid.). As I attempt to show in this thesis, knowledge and ignorance are negotiated and utilised by diverse Tostan stakeholders for strategic and often divergent purposes, in the process clouding complex realities by painting simple, comprehensible pictures in order to fit particular narratives.

An example of this was the case of my host 'mother' in Casamance, Bintou, who had been an important participant in the Tostan project during its implementation in her village (2005-2007), as she had been the head of the project's Community Management Committee, a female-majority 17-member council elected from the village. Prior to the advent of Tostan, Bintou had worked as a literacy tutor with another NGO whose name she could not remember, but said she had 'given it up' because she was not getting paid for her work. During my stay in the village (2009), Bintou led '*les cours de Tostan'* (Tostan classes) several times per week in the schoolhouse with her female peers from the village. The women would gather together in the afternoons after lunch, straggling in at various times until finally there were enough people to start the class. On the first day of my arrival to the village, Bintou swept me down to the schoolhouse (a solid, brightly painted building, with a fine book-lined classroom complete with blackboard, desks and chairs, constructed by the village's French exchange partners) to join in the class with the women. The class participants, enthusiastic and welcoming at my presence, were all married women with children, ranging from women in their early 20s to elderly grandmothers. The topic of the first lesson that I attended was sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Bintou took the role of teacher, standing in front of the class who sat patiently in rows behind desks, and slowly read in Jola from the Tostan textbook in her hands, with the class dutifully repeating these phases after her; occasionally a participant was sent to the blackboard to slowly inscribe a key word or phrase. As these classes continued each week until the rainy season began, I wondered whether they were being put on purely for my benefit, as they appeared to simply be a re-hash of memorised

definitions of concepts such as '*demokaraasi*' (democracy) that they had already 'learned' in the Tostan classes. Local Tostan staff were aware that Bintou was continuing the classes and so they were certainly not just being held to impress me alone, but there was a serious air of performance about the whole exercise, which rarely involved any type of discussion about the topics at hand, in contrast to Tostan's official Freirean pedagogy of participation and dialogue. After each class, Bintou would pointedly mention that she was carrying out Tostan work as a 'facilitator' and that Tostan should pay her for what she was doing. When she learned that Tostan would soon be returning to the village to pilot a new project, she was very pleased, clearly hoping her work would finally be recognised, and that she would get some kind of remuneration from (and ideally a permanent paid position with) the NGO. However, in both her own discourse and that of local Tostan staff, who were familiar with the village and Bintou's activities, her work was portrayed as a voluntary endeavour motivated by the desire to 'sustainably develop' the village, even as the other motivation behind her overt hints about financial remuneration to carry out this activity were fully understood by all interlocutors. As Mosse observes, 'project practices institute and protect sets of representations, which in turn serve to interpret activities, measure performance and define success' (Mosse 2003: 44). In this way, Bintou's activities fit perfectly into Tostan's action plan for villages, called the 'Empowered Communities Network,' aimed at ensuring the sustainability of activities following the end of the project ('sustainability' being a key concern and demand of donors), and the apparent dynamism of her continued class work with village women was often used to showcase Tostan's project 'success' to visiting donors.

## What follows

The Tostan project is a knowledge project: its formal objective is 'dignity for all' (Tostan 2014a), and its approach is based on the transmission of 'good information' (Tostan 2011b). A key argument of this thesis is that in contrast to an understanding of the political and structural impediments to poverty alleviation, equality and 'sustainable development' in Senegal (highlighted above), Tostan discourses portray the changing of 'social norms' within target communities through the acquisition of particular knowledge as the solution to local problems; problems largely defined by the organisation itself. I argue that Tostan's focus on 'harmful traditional practices' (Melching 2012a), identified as 'FGC' and 'child/forced marriage' (ibid.) inter alia, extending more broadly to its interpretations of 'tradition' and 'culture,' is a depoliticised and dehistoricised approach that in itself ignores the significant role played by neocolonial political, cultural and economic structures (within which it is a key actor), in the

production and perpetuation of poverty and inequality in Senegal. In '*giving value* to the culture' (Linsky 2010, emphasis in original), Tostan narratives claim the power to interpret and judge and paint a simplified picture of cultural relations in Senegal, in the process placing the onus firmly on individuals to 'transform' themselves by changing their understandings of health, the way they raise their children, and even how they perceive themselves as persons, through acquisition of the 'knowledge' needed to engender their own 'sustainable development.' These narratives conform neatly to the dominant neoliberal ideology (Harvey 2005) of Tostan's major donors, including US governmental and corporate institutions, reiterating to its 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8) the notion that beneficiaries lack correct knowledge (exemplifying what Gershon and Raj [2000: 6] refer to as attempts by development workers to 'make scientific knowledge the marked and "true" epistemology') and that the transmission of such knowledge by Tostan (rather than challenging or destabilising political structures that impede affordable access to healthcare facilities, say) will secure their 'human dignity.' Such 'forms of ignorance' (Gershon and Raj 2000: 3) are, I argue, constructively employed to secure resources and influence:

> Ignorance frequently has been held as an innocent starting point, a temporary beginning state for journeys into sophisticated conceptualizations. Ignorance is often taken to be static, projected onto others as the first step in constructing stereotypes or in offering aid. (ibid.)

Exploring the diverse ways in which these narratives are employed by different stakeholders within and related to the organisation, I examine how Tostan actors 'create everyday spheres of action autonomous from the organising policy models […] but at the same time work actively to sustain those same models – the dominant interpretations – because it is in their interest to do so' (Mosse 2005: 10).

## Outline of chapters

Chapter 2, **Voyage to 'The 'Village of Knowledge': Processes of Translation and Enlightenment,** tells the Tostan story, and analyses how the organisation's game theory-inspired pedagogy attempts to use Enlightenment ideas of scientific knowledge and rationality and international human rights doctrine as value-free tools for 'social change,' particularly in relation to FGC. I explore the assumptions underlying the human rights movement, aimed at teasing out the 'explicit link between human rights norms and the fundamental characteristics of liberal democracy as practised in the West, and to question the mythical elevation of the human rights corpus beyond politics and political ideology' (Mutua 2002: 2). Analysis of Tostan's political and

cultural ideology (through examination of a project manual for local facilitators) is key to this, highlighting the depoliticised 'responsibilization' discourse underpinning the project, heavily incorporated into NGO and state rhetoric in Senegal on matters such as health.

Chapter 3, **Situating the FGC Intervention: Culture and Politics within Global Debates on Genital Cutting,** frames Tostan within a wider political and epistemological movement that re-defines women's health and in particular reifies FGC as a 'harmful traditional practice.' I analyse the politics of, and contradictions within, global movements that have led to this definition of all customary genital cutting practices conducted on females as a human rights violation, and examine Tostan's position within them.

Chapter 4, **Answering the Call? Tostan and Perspectives on *Excision* in Casamance,** explores the present-day practice and understanding of the *ñakay,* a female initiation ritual that involves genital cutting, in a Casamance village that has supposedly renounced *excision* following the Tostan education programme. The analytical focus equally turns to Tostan's institutional approach to local perspectives and understandings of female sexuality and reproduction, an approach that, I argue, reflects the employment of 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2012a).

Chapter 5, **Dancing with the Powerful: Tostan's Founder**, focuses on Tostan's expatriate founder/Director, in response to Henrietta Moore's call to anthropologists researching FGC practices for 'a much more critical understanding of subjectivity and the discursive and lived relation to bodies, ethnicity, culture, and political economy of the opponents, because they are still too often treated as the "norm," as those who do not have "cultural traditions," as those whose forms of agency and reason are self-evident' (Moore 2007: 327). I analyse the Director's practices through a number of lenses, including Spengemann and Lundquist's (1965) discussion of American myth-making and autobiography and Hilhorst's analysis of NGO leaders as 'brokers of meaning,' exploring the narratives she employs in pursuit of 'legitimation' (Hilhorst 2003: 223, 218) for her organisation.

Chapter 6, **Transnational Knowledge Workers: Tostan's Volunteers**, turns an ethnographic eye on Tostan's volunteer corpus, a diverse group of people who simultaneously constitute the subjects and instruments of the NGO's knowledge-making practices, suggesting that they are 'cosmopolitan connoisseurs' (Hannerz 1996) characterised by their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986). I explore the socio-political ideology underpinning the construction of the category of 'volunteer' and analyse the ways in which this group of people is strategically employed and 'ignored' by different stakeholders within the organisation, depending on the context.

Chapter 7, **Everyday Politics in the World of Tostan Employees** draws on a number of events in Dakar in 2009 to analyse the social and political relations of Tostan's urban-based office staff. A key focus of the chapter lies in the ways in which Tostan actors attempt to utilise and manage knowledge and ignorance in this context, situating these actions within their understandings of the formal aims and ideology of Tostan, itself shaped by the dictates of the donor-driven neoliberal development industry.

Chapter 8: **Conclusion**.

# Chapter 2

## Voyage to 'The Village of Knowledge': Processes of Translation and Enlightenment

> When people are educated, when they have the information they need, when they have human rights and they know their rights... when they are working together, I think we will see a huge change in the world.
>
> Molly Melching, Tostan founder, in Wallace (2011)

> Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (*Sapere aude*.) 'Have the courage to use your own understanding,' is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.
>
> Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784)

> Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown.
>
> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002: 11)

### Introduction

As suggested in Chapter 1, the 'public fictions' (Geissler 2013: 28) of Tostan official rhetoric and the speeches of programme recipients converge in harmony around the idea of the enlightenment of subaltern groups (particularly women) through the possession of correct, empowering information**.** This chapter explores this idea through a genealogical approach to the organisation, tracing the public narratives communicated by and about its founder and Director; the way in which the NGO was set up and aspects of its funding; and how it came to focus on FGC practices. Drawing on published sources, programme materials, and field experiences, as well as dialogue with the Director and others working in the organisation, I analyse the discourse employed in portrayals of Tostan's history and ethos, inextricably linked to the story and personality of its

founder, who established the NGO's nonformal education curriculum for rural women as its core activity. I show how Tostan, at the organisational and individual level, assumes the role of 'translator' by 'vernacularizing' the human rights discourses from the arena of international law and politics to the language and situations of its programme participants (Merry 2006: 39). I illustrate how this translation of international human rights instruments is mapped out in the Tostan model of behaviour change, which uses a social norms theory to explain how people are believed to come to abandon FGC practices, focusing on the way in which ideas of culture and social norms in Senegal are employed by NGO actors as both the cause of and solution to social and economic problems, to the exclusion of challenges to the macro-level political, economic and institutional foundations of inequality. I discuss the historical and cultural basis for the understandings of universal 'rights' and 'knowledge' used to underpin the organisation's work to combat local activities it labels as 'harmful traditional practices' through its education programme. I then examine this curriculum (entitled the '*Kobi*'), exploring the types of knowledge it aims to impart, the notions of personhood underpinning it, and the epistemological gaps it creates in the process, analysing the ways in which human rights claims and biomedical 'knowledge' are used to give legitimacy to the intervention.

## 'Where I'm supposed to be': gender, 'silence,' and the birth of Tostan in Senegal

Tostan's founder and Executive Director is a US citizen named Molly Melching (now in her mid-60s) who departed the United States in 1974 to undertake a university exchange programme in Senegal and 'never returned' (Crewe 2011). Melching's story, deterministic and epiphanic in tone, has been heavily promoted by Tostan in recent years (particularly in the new media) through the many interviews she gives and the conferences and award ceremonies she attends, a list of which the NGO keeps in a database, from which to draw on for grant applications and promotional purposes. This narrative forms the undercurrent to the greater 'Tostan story,' as the excerpt below from an article published online in 2010 illustrates (Linsky 2010):

> It should have been scary. Or at least scarier.
> In the fall of 1974, Molly, all of 24 years old, landed in Dakar, Senegal. It was her first trip to the continent, a six-month stint to be spent studying African literature. She had one bag. And no ride. Molly had missed a telegram from Dakar, which arrived at her Illinois home just after she had left for the airport. The programme had been canceled, it read. She shouldn't come.
> As she sat on the steps outside the airport wondering why nobody was there to greet her, Molly had none of the feelings you might expect of a young, stranded traveler. She

> wasn't nervous. She wasn't worried. 'I can't explain the feeling,' she says now, searching for the words. 'It sounds weird, but I felt like I'd come home.' So Molly stuck around. It wouldn't be the last time she trusted her instincts.

Melching's story, as narrated by herself and reproduced in the media, often begins with an 'arrival trope' (Pratt 1986: 42) of this type, describing her first trip to Senegal. The language employed ('it should have been scary'), implies bravery and intrepidness in the context of an exotic and potentially dangerous Africa. The excerpt above, taken from an article entitled *The Moment of My Inspiration: Molly Melching's Story,* is typical in the way in which it recounts in heroic and missionary terms Melching's first trip to Senegal. The narrative is constructed and reinforced for external consumption to portray the idea of an 'adventurous heroine' within 'the primary tropes of travel that centuries of imperialist economic expansion have engendered' (Grewal and Kaplan 1996: 15, 17). The fatalistic tone of the story describes Melching's determination to stay in Senegal, as if following a calling: 'she followed her instincts' to explore this unknown territory, in the face of some unidentified opposition (Linsky 2010):

> I told them there was no way I was leaving,' she says—and she landed a dorm room at the university. But college life soon became constricting. She was itching to escape the relatively rarefied air of campus life and see how others in Africa lived. 'That was a very strong feeling within me,' she says.
> Again, she followed her instincts.

The article goes on to recount how Melching visited a village in Mauritania where she encountered FGC for the first time: '"I was so shocked", she said' (ibid.). Viewing the practice as 'totally intractable,' she nonetheless felt that there were 'issues she could address, and she dedicated the next 20-plus years of her life to doing so,' and set up her NGO, Tostan, focusing on nonformal literacy education in the Wolof language (ibid.). *'Tostan*' is itself a Wolof word that literally means 'hatching'—commonly translated as the French *éclosion* in Senegal—and is explained by Melching as meaning 'breakthrough' (Wallace 2011).

The story of Melching's work to counteract FGC specifically is detailed in her 2013 biography, *However Long The Night* (Molloy 2013). In Chapter 7 of the book (entitled 'Empathy'), Melching draws parallels between a traumatic experience of her own in which she was 'silenced' by society at home in the United States, and the trauma and suffering she projects onto what she refers to as the 'vow of silence' taken by initiates during a Casamance female coming-of-age ceremony. 'Empathy' begins by recounting how in 1975 (a year after her arrival in Senegal), 25-year-old Melching was invited to attend a male circumcision festival in Casamance, which

involves the genital cutting of boys, much feast-making, and the subsequent seclusion of the cohort of initiates in the 'sacred forest,' where they are exposed to esoteric and religious knowledge.[13] Melching enjoyed this experience thoroughly as an exotic and curious event: 'Through it all, Molly felt as she so often did since she'd arrived in Senegal a year earlier: fortunate to be included in an experience like this, so unusual and unlike anything most outsiders would ever get to witness' (Molloy 2013: 66). The book goes on to describe how one day during this visit, she stumbled upon the female initiation ritual, which in Casamance almost exactly parallels its male counterpart. Melching was told that the girls involved in the ceremony learn to be submissive and have to take what she referred to as a 'vow of silence':

> Each girl was taught that as a wife and mother she must be patient, polite, obedient, and ready to serve others. She should not talk too much, and never about family secrets, and she must show honour to her parents, love her husband, and adore her children. She was taught ways in which to show respect: never looking someone in the eyes when speaking, kneeling when greeting or bringing water, speaking softly, not talking or laughing too much. (Molloy 2013: 67-68)

In the book, Melching also describes how women were told that in exchange for their ability to bring life into the world, 'you will know suffering and you do not have the right to complain' (p. 68).[14] She goes on to interpret this silencing as the disempowerment or oppression of the girls, by juxtaposing it with her own suffering in silence following an incident of sexual assault some years prior while she was a college student in the United States (ibid.). By projecting her own interpretation onto the 'silence' of the Casamance girls, she equated it with a traumatic experience she had had at home with a fellow student who had attempted to rape her, and the subsequent reaction of those around her who encouraged her not to speak out against her would-be rapist as he was 'politically well connected' (p. 71). The message of the chapter is that Melching felt empathy for what she viewed as the suffering in silence of the female initiates in Casamance; the implication is that this 'silence' is a powerful reason to eliminate FGC and the rituals associated with it. Melching's empathy was presumably founded on her common gender with the girls and young women, with whom she consequently felt a personal identification; the

[13] See Davidson (2007) for an ethnographic exploration of 'studying secrets' among the Jola of Guinea-Bissau, as well as Mark's (1992) study of Jola-Fonyi male initiation (*bukut*), which covers many aspects of secrecy in *bukut* practices.

[14] Given the level of secrecy surrounding both male and female initiation rituals in Casamance, which Dellenborg states are 'generally considered too "hot" to speak of… doing so may bring danger to the speaker' (2007: 122), it is curious that Melching became aware of this information locally; the book gives no further details.

equivalent *bukut* (male initiation rite) event she attended, involving a similar 'vow of silence' as well as a painful genital cutting ritual and long seclusion in the forest did not elicit similar expressions of trauma and empathy.

In analysing the distinction and foundation for gender-based empathy that I argue is constructed within this narrative, which appears to be based solely on whether the rituals were undergone by girls or boys, I refer to Chandra Mohanty's essay *Under Western Eyes,* which points out the problematics of an understanding of 'women' as a group, or a stable category of analysis:

> It assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalised notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socio-economic political groups *within* particular local contexts, this move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. (Mohanty 1984: 344, emphasis in original)

Closely related to this, Melching's focus on the secrecy and silence surrounding the ritual knowledge imparted to the girls during the ceremony and her interpretation of this silence is a greater indication of her own culturally influenced beliefs about silence, than the meaning of silence in the context she describes. In the Lower Casamance context, a range of female issues including initiation, pregnancy, and childbirth are shrouded in silence and secrecy; as is equally the case for initiated men, who must remain as silent as women about the knowledge they acquire during their own initiation rite, the *bukut*. In the broader context in Senegal, keeping silent is often a highly valued practice, carrying connotations of control, morality and protection. An example of this is women's silence during childbirth, when the ability to endure pain without complaining is considered a great strength; during births I attended in Elounou all but one of the women withheld expressing her pain verbally. Boys' ability to endure in silence ordeals such as circumcision is equally highly esteemed. Silence (including what to an outsider may seem the strange lack of commentary or congratulation on the birth of a child) is also a way to protect vulnerable individuals such as newborns, pregnant women, or those who have experienced good fortune, from the attention of malevolent spirits. Van Tilburg (1998: 186) writes that among the Jola, the power of knowledge (for women) lay in its secrecy and the fact that it was not conveyed in public, verbal ways: 'I learned that knowledge withheld from others is as powerful as is knowledge of the biological process. Knowledge in this instance is not information but a practice of knowing.' As ethnographer Joanna Davidson (2007: 146-7) observed about the Jola among whom she lived in Guinea-Bissau:

> Beyond gendered domains of secrecy and arenas of religious/esoteric knowledge, Diola [sic] were guarded about even the most seemingly mundane information. Secrecy

> regarding one's movements, possessions, and opinions seemed to be embedded in almost every instance of quotidian social interaction. There was often a deliberate effort to shroud even the most pedestrian things.

Davidson came to the conclusion that in this context, 'the content of the secret was irrelevant; it was the performance surrounding its concealment and revelation that was significant' (ibid.: 148). Indeed, my host 'father,' Ousmane, a northern Sereer living in a Jola village, laughingly joked about the Jola and their traditions, saying, 'the Jola are full of secrets.' Davidson argues that for the Jola, the idiom of secrecy is 'staked out—both internally and externally—as a form of ethnic distinction' (ibid.). This tallies with Beryl Bellman's view that, 'the content of the secret is not as significant as the doing of secrecy' (Bellman 1984: 16-17). In this context, silence as a contributing factor to secrecy may be an important, powerful marker of both ethnic distinction and gendered subjectivity.

Melching's portrayal of the secrecy and 'vow of silence' (her own words) she saw in Casamance may therefore be interpreted as a personal projection, one not necessarily related to the experience of the initiates. Her belief about the silence related to the female initial ritual may be understood in terms of Ardener's (1977) understanding of 'mutedness,' as a passive concept where women are 'muted' by others. Ardener's theory (in an essay entitled *Belief and the Problem of Women),* and its promulgation by many feminists, has been criticised by anthropologists such as Keesing (1985) for assuming that silence and lack of articulation signify passivity and powerlessness. The latter argues that silence must be understood within an analysis of the broader political, cultural and economic contexts in which reality is negotiated.

Melching's interpretation of the Jola female initiation ritual places silence in opposition to verbal expression, discursively juxtaposing the binary pairing of [silence / speech] with [powerlessness / power] in a gendered context of [women / men], an understanding common to much of Western feminist orthodoxy, such as e.g. Belenky et al.'s *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986), to which Melching refers as an inspiration for Tostan's pedagogy (Gillespie and Melching 2001: 481). This conflation of silence with powerlessness (and verbal expression with power) is illustrated in Tostan's 2012 annual report, which claims that:

> Girls and women […] have less opportunity to voice their opinions […] through our classes, women become more comfortable with engaging in dialogue and taking part in important decisions for their communities, and develop leadership skills. (Tostan 2012a)

The perceived inability of women in Senegal to speak in the verbal and explicit terms of dominant discourse (the statement itself is a major overgeneralisation) is portrayed here as evidence of their subordination. The act of 'voicing opinions' and 'engaging in dialogue' is consequently viewed as an automatic advance in women's situations under this narrative, and reflects the depoliticised emphasis on the social rather than the political or the economic within contemporary development discourse. This view disregards the important role of silence in social relations, highlighted in Georg Simmel's contention that, 'if human sociation is conditioned by the capacity to speak, it is shaped by the capacity to be silent' (Simmel 1950: 349). Similarly, a fundamental assumption underpinning the Tostan programme (in common with most interventions against FGC, e.g. UNICEF 2013) is that when beneficiaries publicly declare their opposition to FGC and/or their intention to stop practising it (especially to outside audiences) their words accurately reflect their attitudes and intentions, once more placing emphasis on verbal expression over other forms of communication and meaning.

Analysing Melching's representations of the experiences she had in Senegal that motivated her to form an NGO and ultimately combat FGC practices across Africa, I draw parallels with Grewal and Kaplan's (1996) critique of US feminist filmmaker Alice Walker's journey in 1993 to The Gambia to make her film *Warrior Marks,* about 'female genital mutilation.' These authors draw on the discourses of colonial and postcolonial studies which, they argue, have produced:

> A by-now standard critique of objectification, essentialism, exoticization, and Orientalism as the representational practices of modern Western imperialism. That is, an oppositional power relation between colonizer and colonized has come to be understood as a crucial dynamic at work in the disciplines, institutions, subjects, and practices of modernity. (Grewal and Kaplan 1996: 5)

They address 'the power relations between the different hybrid subjects produced during centuries of imperialism and modernity,' arguing that, 'the center-periphery model, or West/Non-West binary, is inadequate to understand contemporary world conditions under globalization: the relations between gendering practices, class formations, sexual identities, racialized subjects, transnational affiliations, and diasporic nationalisms' (ibid.). They use this premise to analyse the beliefs and practices underlying Walker's well-intended but controversial film, at once lauded and condemned for its portrayal of African women as 'victims of their own culture' (ibid.). In the film, Walker, like Melching, projects her own experience of tragedy (a childhood assault by her brother leaving her with permanent blindness in one eye) onto the bodies of women 'whom she perceives to be in peril from patriarchal violence' (ibid.: 12). The authors critique Walker's

decision to align herself through this experience with 'genitally mutilated women' (Walker's words), arguing that, 'like so many acts of identification, it enacts its own epistemic violence and erasures' (ibid.). Similarly, I argue that Melching's self-identification with female initiates in Casamance and the ways in which she projects her own understandings of silence (as a manifestation of subordination) onto the latter, 'requires an elision of material difference in favour of a fantasized similarity' (ibid.), and is a commonly found strategy of representation within the prevailing gender and development discourse more generally (see Leve 2001).

In the account quoted above of Melching's arrival to Senegal (Linsky 2010), the Tostan Director highlights her awareness of her status as a 'white woman from Illinois' in Africa, the 'tricky' position she found herself in, and her expressed reticence to get involved with the 'intractable' issue of FGC, stating that after founding her NGO she had tried to 'steer […] the organization away from forcing new social norms' (ibid.), Melching tells of her interaction with women from the village of Malicounda, which she said, forced upon her 'a complicated role [that] was impossible to escape' (i.e. as a foreign leader in the movement to abandon FGC) (ibid.). In this narrative, Melching is a reluctant saviour, someone who did not seek the role nor its attendant celebrity, who 'didn't go to change the culture, that's what's so ironic… I went to *give value* to the culture' (ibid., emphasis in original).

Although Melching attempts to avoid charges of 'going to change the culture' in neo-imperialist manner, I suggest that this professed desire to '*give value* to the culture' reproduces the social and political relations inherited from European colonialism that underpin contemporary development orthodoxy. Agustín, writing about 'the rise of the social' in 19th century Europe and the role of bourgeois women as self-appointed helpers of the impoverished and excluded, argues that, 'the social invented not only its objects but the necessity to do something about them, and thereby its own need to exist' (Agustín 2007a: 107).

Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) allusion to the concept of 'planetary consciousness' as an emerging 18th century European bourgeois identity may also be applied to considerations of Melching's representation of her involvement in issues such as FGC in Senegal. Pratt's theory, that the emerging bourgeois traveller understood him/herself as passive (in the sense of not seeking to dominate, but simply to explore, record, or trade etc.), applies to Melching's statement that she 'didn't go to change the culture,' but found herself an unwitting catalyst for change in the lives of her interlocutors. However, this 'planetary consciousness,' which Barbara Heron argues is a

feature of White, Northern development workers, may be a colonial continuity as it is the product of a sense of 'entitlement and obligation to intervene on a world scale, operating through relations of comparison with racialized Others' (Heron 1999: 228). The bourgeois 'planetary consciousness,' which I also explore as an element of the worldview of Tostan's volunteers (see Chapter 6), developed during the Age of Exploration of the colonial project (an age that saw the establishment and predominance of a specific form of rational scientific knowledge born of the European Enlightenment) is a way of knowing the world that has since come to dominate and be consolidated within global capitalism (Sharpe 2009). As I attempt to elucidate throughout this thesis, Melching's decision to set up an NGO that is 'culturally respectful' (Tostan 2011c) of its participants, has nonetheless produced an organisation that, like many contemporary development NGOs working with women, 'does not challenge the male dominated elite world of IMF privatizations, multi-national corporations and local landlords. Rather, it focuses on "patriarchy" in the household, family violence, divorce, family planning, etc. In other words, it fights for gender equality within the micro-world of exploited peoples in which the exploited and impoverished male worker/peasant emerges as the main villain' (Petras 1999). In the section that follows, I explore this context by describing the setting up of Tostan as an NGO.

## Forming an NGO, developing a curriculum

According to Wolfgang Sachs (1992: 2), the contemporary 'age of development' can be traced to 20 January 1949, and the inaugural speech of US President Harry Truman, when he first declared nations in the Southern Hemisphere to be 'underdeveloped areas.' Sachs argues that this invention and labelling of entire regions of the world as 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' provided the cognitive base for the development industry as it exists today.

NGOs are now key players in this global development industry. According to Guilhot (2005: 6), attention should be paid to NGOs as 'moral actors,' and to:

> […] the function and the legitimating effects of the ideology of global citizenship and civic virtue which is associated with them. Virtue is guaranteed by status, wealth, and recognition. Virtue, in other words, presupposes economic and social capital. NGOs are the honoratiores, the optimati, that is, the aristocratic class of the present times.

For Hilhorst (2003: 7, emphasis in original):

> The (NGO) label is a *claim-bearing* label. In its most common use, it claims that the

> organisation is 'doing good for the development of others.' The label has a moral component. Precisely because it is doing good, the organisation can make a bid to access funding and public representation.

Former *Médecins Sans Frontière*s president, Rony Brauman, discussing what he views as the global shift from philanthropy to humanitarianism, notes that this shift began in the 1970s (the era when Melching began her work with Tostan), as 'sovereignty-free' (i.e. non-State) actors, and discourses of the individual as the subject of development, began to appear:

> With urbanization, instantaneous communication, and the democratization of transportation (invention of charters), we are witnessing a 'revolution in the abilities and aptitudes of the individual.' It is within this context that private organizations of all kinds have been multiplying and developing at a rate that would have been unimaginable at any other time… This new 'revolution' allows private groups to begin establishing themselves in areas that up until now have been reserved for states. (Brauman 2004: 406)

It is within this development context that Melching formally incorporated her growing organisation in 1991 as a '501(c)(3) non-governmental organisation' under United States law (thereby incorporating the fiscal benefits, but also the restrictions on political activity, that accompany this classification),[15] after having secured funding for Tostan's activities from international donors such as USAID and UNICEF. Tostan's small US office is located in Washington, D.C. (where the focus is mainly on fundraising, promotional and financial activities), while its international headquarters are in Dakar, with numerous regional offices throughout Senegal and in seven other African countries, as well as sister offices in France, Sweden and Canada.

Although originally concentrating on literacy, in 1995, Tostan began to focus on themes of human rights and democracy. Describing this shift, Melching recounts how Tostan team members 'discovered […] the importance of human rights and democracy for learning […] from praxis' (Gillespie and Melching 2010: 478). This discovery led the NGO to place modules on these topics at the forefront of its curriculum, described as 'a holistic, human rights–based programme of nonformal education […] learner-centred […] and culturally-based,' incorporating 'traditional

[15] 'Organizations covered by section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. These are the benevolent organizations whose receipts are tax-exempt, and whose contributions are tax-deductible for the donors. They are generally the only organizations that receive foundation grants. In turn, they must restrict political advocacy and may not engage in election campaigns. They also may not distribute profits to shareholders' (Roelofs 2006). According to the US Department of State (2012a), there are approximately 1.5 million NGOs incorporated in the United States.

West African proverbs, songs, stories, plays, and dances' into its pedagogical approach (ibid.: 479).

This pedagogy is incorporated in a three-year curriculum called the 'Community Empowerment Program,' consisting of two modules, the *Kobi* (a Mandinka word translated as 'to prepare a field for planting'), and the *Aawde*, (a Fulani word translated as 'to plant a seed'). In the *Kobi* sessions, class members (usually women) are taught 'democracy, human rights, health, hygiene and problem solving,' using 'participatory methods' (UNESCO 2014). Participants also receive microcredit, and training in skills such as tie-dye, needlework, and fruit preservation as income-generating activities. The *Aawde* module incorporates the 'literacy and economic empowerment' element of the programme, focusing on 'basic literacy; math for management; project management; and workbook review' (ibid.). During the period of my fieldwork (2009-10) Tostan piloted an SMS mobile phone project in Casamance aimed at enhancing literacy (in partnership with the Orange telecom company and with technical and financial support from UNICEF New York).[16]

'Empowering' education combined with technical approaches is thus offered in order to bring about the promised 'sustainable development' and 'human dignity.' In addition to the SMS project mentioned above, Tostan's technical solutions include projects to train elderly female villagers as 'solar engineers' to provide electricity for their villages (in partnership with an NGO in India, see Allen 2013); the promotion of childhood vaccination; and the transmission of biomedical and scientific knowledge about bodies and health. In this schema, the possession of certain types of knowledge (especially knowledge related to international human rights norms), the ability to exercise individual choice, and the provision of 'tools' to enable individual and community access to resources are hoped to pave the way to the 'empowerment' and thus 'development' of participants. I now turn briefly to the theme of empowerment, as it applies in the Tostan case.

## 'Empowerment' and global philanthropy: a theme and a funding stream

Writing about activists working within the sex industry in Europe, Agustín (2007b: 529) argues

[16] Hull (2001) argues that the emerging focus on the 'knowledge economy' within which 'ICT4D' ('Information and Communication Technologies for Development') interventions such as this are situated prioritises the development of financial markets and the promotion of neoliberal corporate interests.

that 'empowerment' is:

> The next logical step following on from solidarity. Used by those who view themselves as helpers of others or fighters for social justice, empowerment is the current politically correct way to conceptualise helping. But empower is a transitive verb whose subject is the person doing the empowering, and empowerment a technology aimed at 'constituting active and participatory citizens' while simultaneously linking subjects with their own subjection.

Indeed, the very word 'empowerment' is 'an NGO word' (Agustín 2000), as indicated in the difficulties in its translation into other languages, with Tostan's case in Senegal being no exception. In English, Tostan's plan of action is called the 'Community Empowerment Program,' translated into French as *le Programme pour la Capacitation Communautaire*; '*capacitation*' is used to translate 'empowerment,' but is a word little known in French outside of this context (similar to the Spanish '*empoderamiento,*' as discussed by Agustín ibid.). 'Empowerment' is a major preoccupation of many of Tostan's most significant donors. These include multilateral agencies such as UNICEF and UNFPA; bilateral agencies such as USAID and NORAD; and corporate foundations such as the Nike Foundation and the Skoll Foundation.

During the period of my fieldwork, Tostan was in receipt of funding from the Nike Foundation as part of the latter's 'Girl Effect' project. The stated aim of this 'movement' is to empower 'adolescent girls [to] stop poverty before it starts' (Nike Foundation 2010); to 'unleash […] the unique potential of 600 million adolescent girls to solve poverty for themselves and the world' (Kanani 2011). According to the Foundation's CEO, the 'insight' behind this approach is that 'girls weren't being educated because their families couldn't see the return on that investment. Her [sic] potential wasn't valued' (ibid.), and the logic is that:

> Girls are the single most important investment we can possibly make. What happens to an adolescent girl impacts everyone around her and every single aid objective we have. They alone will solve poverty, education, health, hunger, HIV, population and climate change, and every other issue our nation cares about. (ibid.)

In partnership with agencies including the World Bank (that also prioritises 'empowering women and girls for shared prosperity,' World Bank 2014), the Nike Foundation funds organisations such as Tostan that focus on the 'empowerment' of girls, who are viewed as facing 'social, economic and cultural barriers that currently block their catalytic power' (Nike Foundation 2010). This may be achieved through 'the power of brands,' e.g. creation of 'a brand designed to create social change, in an environment where deeply entrenched attitudes and behaviour hold girls back'

(ibid.). In Tostan's case, it received funding under the 'Girl Effect' to facilitate 'community dialogue' on 'norms of gender-based violence' in the Kaolack region of Senegal.

An example such as this of wealthy donors' interest in female 'empowerment' uses adolescent girls as metonyms for the transformative power of philanthropy, framing poverty within a depoliticised narrative of female subordination in the face of 'social, economic and cultural barriers,' and offers 'education' and 'awareness-raising' as the solution, justifying it as 'smart economics' (Nike Foundation 2010). However, the Nike corporation has itself been heavily criticised for the labour exploitation of young people in Asia through the operation of so-called 'sweatshops' either directly or through its sub-contractors, its refusal to pay minimum wages, and its discouragement of labour unions (Wilsey and Lichtig 1999). Nike has also been criticised for moving its production operations to different countries when workers demand better wages (ibid.). In light of such practices, Joan Roelofs argues that corporations' involvement in the 'third sector' of development and philanthropy chiefly serves as a 'protective layer for the vagaries of capitalism,' mitigating 'the shock of marketisation, which has brought about […] unemployment and destitution' (Roelofs 2006: 21). Authors Eikenberry and Nickel contend that:

> The practice of philanthropy in this context may be understood as the maintenance of the conditions necessary for the capitalist mode of production […] Much of the suffering that philanthropy aims to alleviate is not the result of a lack of philanthropy, but the result of a system that makes philanthropy necessary. (Eikenberry and Nickel 2006: 10, 13-14)

In the same vein, philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2006), writing about billionaire businessmen-turned-philanthropists George Soros and Bill Gates, describes this paradox as follows:

> This is what makes a figure like Soros ethically so problematic. His daily routine is a lie embodied: Half of his working time is devoted to financial speculations and the other half to humanitarian activities that ultimately fight the effects of his own speculations. Likewise the two faces of Bill Gates: a cruel businessman, destroying or buying out competitors, aiming at virtual monopoly, employing all the dirty tricks to achieve his goals… and the greatest philanthropist in the history of mankind.

Tostan claims to offer a range of social and technical solutions to the problems facing beneficiary communities in Africa, to be achieved primarily through the 'empowerment' of women and girls via human rights education; the underlying assumption being that women and girls in Senegal are 'disempowered' and lacking knowledge of their rights, largely due to the constraints of 'tradition' and 'culture.' The work of Marxist-inspired Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (in particular, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed)* and his focus on 'the concrete, existential, present situation of real

people' (Freire 2002: 93, quoted in Gillespie and Melching 2010: 481) is a stated foundation for Tostan's approach.[17] Such an approach clearly has rhetorical appeal to donors such as Nike and other funders operating within the 'non-profit industrial complex' (Rodríguez 2007: 21), especially when applied exclusively to socially- and culturally-defined 'barriers' to poverty alleviation that do not challenge the status quo that enables such donors to accumulate wealth in the first place. In this regard, Tostan's priorities and approach consciously correspond with the interests of these 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8), especially when applied to issues of 'culture' such as FGC, which I introduce below.

## Ending 'the tradition': Tostan and 'the movement to abandon Female Genital Cutting'

Tostan has won several prestigious and lucrative awards for its work, including the million-dollar Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize in 2007, and in 2010 Molly Melching was named a Skoll Foundation 'Social Entrepreneur' (Strebing 2013). The Tostan founder's biography, to which I referred above (entitled *However Long the Night: One Woman's Journey to Help Millions of African Girls and Women Triumph,* Molloy 2013) was commissioned by the Skoll Foundation, and describes how Melching 'help[ed] spawn one of the most significant human rights movements in African history' (ibid.: 12). A largely hagiographical account of her life, the book offers an essentialised and often romanticised view of Senegal. It includes the story of a group of women participants in the Tostan programme from the village of Malicounda Bambara, who were the first group to publicly renounce FGC. Everyone working with Tostan is very familiar with the 'Malicounda Bambara story'; I refer to the biography above and other published materials on Tostan in briefly summarising the narrative as follows.

In 1997, a group of women from the village of Malicounda Bambara[18] (in the *département* of Mbour, around 85km south-east of Dakar) approached Melching and informed her that following their experience with her programme, they had decided to stop practising 'the tradition,' but they needed her support to enable them to do so. The women's decision was prompted by a statement

[17] For a critical evaluation of Freire's 'revolutionary' approach and its adoption by social workers in the United States, see Facundo (1984).

[18] Founded in 1902 by migrants from Mali, Malicounda (literally, 'house of Mali') includes ethnic Bambara, Fulani and Wolof among its population, the majority of whom practised *excision* at the time of the event described here.

by the WHO read to them by the Tostan facilitator, declaring that 'female genital mutilation is an act of violence towards the young girl that will affect her life as an adult,' as well as a theatre sketch in class about a young girl who had undergone 'the tradition' and subsequently died of haemorrhage (Molloy 2013: 15). The women had now come to view 'the tradition' as a violation of human rights and human dignity, and wished to stop perpetuating it. Melching was advised by UNICEF to encourage the Malicounda women to publicly declare this decision so as to reach as wide an audience as possible, and so Tostan organised a 'Public Declaration' in the village, at which the women announced before the national media that they had renounced FGC (Molloy 2013: 27). This declaration initially aroused some vocal opposition, partly in reaction to the 'shame' of making public a taboo subject (Easton and Monkman 2001: 1). A turning point then occurred when the imam of a neighbouring village, Demba Diawara, approached Melching with his concerns. Diawara stated that he was not opposed to the abandonment of FGC, and in fact now supported the Declaration. However, he was worried that the movement would not succeed if only one or two villages made the resolution to abandon. Diawara said all related villages involved would have to take part, otherwise 'you are asking parents to forfeit the chance of their daughters getting married' (ibid.).

Secondly, Diawara pointed out that FGC, as a taboo topic, should not be discussed 'lightly or inconsiderately,' stating that other activists had, in the past, used language in mixed audiences that villagers considered 'unmentionable… and images and pictures that shocked them' (Easton et al. 2003: 449). As a result of this discussion, Diawara and some of the Malicounda women (including a former 'traditional cutter') visited the 13 villages in their 'marriage community' and convinced the latter of the need to abandon *excision* and to permit unexcised women to marry (ibid.). Following this, all 13 villages decided to abandon the practice, and in February 1998 gathered to enact the 'Diabougou Declaration' (organised by Tostan), pledging their 'firm commitment to end the practice of female circumcision in our community' (Mackie 1996: 257).

This led to further Declarations in other villages in the region. Tostan then began to incorporate explicitly the message of FGC as a human rights violation into its programme, and its now standard strategy of organising 'Public Declarations' against FGC and other 'harmful traditional practices' to be held by large groups of 'communities' following their completion of its programme (Tostan 2013a). In addition to using a game theory model to frame and promote its activities (discussed below), Tostan implements a strategy it calls 'organised diffusion' to ensure its message reaches the maximum number of people. Under this strategy, each participant 'adopts' a non-participant from her 'social network' and spreads the 'knowledge' she has

acquired, until theoretically all members of the network have received the message (Tostan 2014b). As a theory this model has been very attractive (especially to donors) and can justify extremely impressive claims for the reach for the programme, if one counts in this the inhabitants of all potential 'adopted' villages that have not participated directly in the programme.

The promotion by Tostan of the Malicounda women's 'Public Declaration' served to highlight the issue of FGC internationally, bringing it to the attention of then US President, Bill Clinton and First Lady, Hillary Clinton, who made a high profile visit to the village in 1998. Hillary Clinton has since become a de facto patron of Tostan and Melching (see Chapter 3). A law banning *excision* in Senegal was subsequently enacted by President Abdou Diouf in 1999, doubtless influenced by prodding by the United States government, one of the country's most important sources of development aid funding (Antonazzo 2003: 474). This amendment to the penal code criminalised those who would 'violate the integrity of the female genitalia,' or 'influence' others to do so. Hecht (1999) reports that the law was passed without parliamentary debate, although the government circulated advance drafts to representatives of international organisations based in Senegal, particularly UNICEF and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). If fully applied, the ban meant that, at the time, more than one million people in Senegal could potentially have been jailed for up to five years for complicity in the practice (ibid.).

Prior to the passing of the law, women from Malicounda Bambara and other villages who had made public declarations to end FGC advised the Senegalese National Assembly that criminalisation would hinder, rather than help their cause. As they predicted, the law backfired in the face of nationwide resistance. The ban interrupted Tostan's activities, forcing it to temporarily suspend its projects in the face of a wide backlash against the law. Many villages refused to participate in Tostan programmes, as they associated it with the law that had criminalised them. In defiance, a greater numbers of girls were excised in the months following the introduction of the law (Hecht 1999). That year, the grandmother and mother of a five-year-old girl were arrested in the Tambacounda region, following a complaint by the girl's father alleging they had ordered that *excision* be performed on his daughter. The 'cutter' was also charged. Following public outcry in the region, however, the prosecution of the women was abandoned. As a result of this public resistance and the fear of mass riots, the government of Senegal has made little attempt to enforce this law (see O'Neill 2012), and no convictions have been brought since it was passed. As controversy over the law died down nationally, Tostan resumed its efforts to halt the practice and collaborated with the government of Senegal to produce a five-year 'National Action Plan for the

Acceleration of the Abandonment of Excision,' launched in February 2010.

Through these experiences, the enrolment of 'multiple stakeholders' (especially 'local traditional and religious leaders') in the Tostan project has become a key element of the NGO's approach to project implementation (Tostan 2009a: 9). A 2009 promotional brochure produced by Tostan explains that before implementing a programme on reproductive health, facilitators introduce themselves in order to 'engage and gain the full support of local religious and traditional leaders' (ibid.: 11). The same brochure includes a quote from *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof stating that:

> Perhaps the most successful effort to end [female genital] cutting is that of Tostan, a West African group that takes a very respectful approach and places FGC within a larger framework of community development. Rather than lecturing the women, the programs's representatives encourage villagers to discuss the human rights and health issues related to cutting and then make their own choices. The program's soft sell has worked far better than the hard sell. (Kristof and WuDunn 2009: 224 in Tostan 2009a: 29)

This 'soft sell' approach, which involves the enrolment (as opposed to the bypassing) of local actors in positions of influence and power, forms the basis for Tostan's implementation strategy, accounting for the general acceptance of its programme by local beneficiaries. Local elites are not threatened by the entry of the NGO to their domain, but instead, view its intervention as a way to enhance their own prestige and economic opportunities. In this regard, Tostan's approach indeed displays a clear understanding of the dynamics of local power. For example, I observed that when a Tostan staff member arrived to a village in a smart off-road vehicle, making his/her first stop at the home of the chief or imam in a rural village with no mechanised vehicles, these local actors responded positively to this enhancement of their status locally, in tandem with their hopes of achieving future benefits through association with the NGO. As a result (and as illustrated in the opening pages of this thesis), local leaders in Casamance speak enthusiastically about the programme and its effects, and are an important source of legitimacy for the NGO locally, nationally and internationally.

At time of writing (mid-2014), the organisation reports that over 7,000 communities in its six countries of intervention have 'publicly declared abandonment of FGC and child/forced marriage' (Tostan 2013b). As noted earlier, the term 'community' is not clearly defined, and so the actual number of people reached is not clear. Although 'Public Declarations' of abandonment are the main measure of success, Tostan acknowledges that these declarations do not mean that

100% of a given population has given up the practice, but states that, 'public declarations are critical in the process for total abandonment and necessary for building critical mass, eventually leading FGC to becoming a thing of the past' (ibid.).

## Planting the seed: culture and the translation of international human rights

Tostan's official mission is 'to empower African communities to bring about *sustainable development* and *positive social transformation* based on *respect for human rights'* (Tostan 2014a, emphasis added). Human rights as a tool and rationale for interventions to empower targeted people and conduct a project of social change among them, is the key theoretical driver of the organisation's activities. The implicit assumption is that the concepts highlighted above are all inherently desirable, and may be achieved through the NGO's intervention. It is also implicit that these concepts are lacking among target groups, and that their introduction is a necessary change.

The vision is an ambitious one: social transformation by changing values. In 2010, Peter, Tostan's Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator, an American in his mid-twenties who had spent several years (beginning as a volunteer) working for the organisation, explained this as follows: 'it's when the participants in the class understand those rights; that's the point of changing their value framework… to put those behaviours into practice and create a new value structure around it' (fieldnotes, Dakar, February 2010).

For Peter, human rights consisted of the translation of international conventions: they 'present not only the actual conventions, and the wording of those conventions, but breaking it down into understandable information that a non literate person can understand' (ibid.). The Director of Communications, Ethan, stated that Tostan sits 'in the middle,' between communities and donors, speaking the correct 'language' to each (interview, Dakar, January 2011):

> You have all these local NGOs, who know nothing about the donor world, nothing about reporting. And, can't speak that language. So it's really about language... I think what I see Tostan always doing… if it's a Venn diagram and they're not touching… you have Tostan in the middle and we're sitting there and we're trying to hold onto both.

In this view, Tostan's role is that of translator of human rights ideas by 'mapping the middle,' as Sally Engle Merry (2006: 42) describes:

> Translators negotiate the middle in a field of power and opportunity. On the one hand, they have to speak the language of international human rights preferred by international donors to get funds and global media attention. On the other hand, they have to present their initiatives in cultural terms that will be acceptable to at least some of the local community. As they scramble for funds, they need to select issues that international donors are interested in—such as female genital cutting, women's empowerment, or the trafficking of women and children—and connect these agendas to problems that interest local populations - such as clean drinking water, more jobs, or good roads.

Merry argues that such translators 'translate up and down' (ibid.). From this perspective, human rights is not a once and for all defined programme of demands, but is a view of the world and the place of people in it and its translation is necessarily a space of continuing contestation, depending on translator and audience.

Tostan generally focuses on FGC as a violation of the right to health, employing the human rights discourse in an overtly apolitical manner. As Wendy Brown (2004: 453) notes:

> Human rights activism generally presents itself as something of an antipolitics—a pure defense of the innocent and the powerless against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals. More precisely, human rights take their shape as a moral discourse centered on pain and suffering rather than political discourse of comprehensive justice.

Tostan's representation of women's health problems in Senegal (to internal and external stakeholders) disregards the structural and historical causes of poverty and inequality in favour of a lack of 'correct' (i.e. human rights) knowledge, exemplifying Mutua's assessment of the depoliticisation of the prevailing human rights discourse, 'which obscures […] the cultural identity of the norms it seeks to universalize' (Mutua 2002: 1). Poverty and deprivation are represented as resulting from a lack of knowledge, and a lack of capacity, in the sense advocated by Amartya Sen (1999). Liberal democratic values in the form of human rights and the resulting 'empowerment' through the acquisition of previously lacking scientific information are advocated as solutions: 'empowerment is about having the information you need to make a difference in your life where that formerly would not have been possible' (Tostan Director, interview, Dakar January 2011). Tostan's donation appeals message is illustrative of this (see Appendix B). Here, empowerment ('the best gift you can give') is a commodity that can be purchased and conferred, like electronics, and Tostan represents itself as the broker who can deliver this 'gift,' in a process that is, I suggest, reflective of 'old narrative patterns as well as new ways of commodifying the [African] continent' (Steeves 2008: 419; see also Baptista 2012).

Tostan's Director is unequivocal about the global applicability of the doctrine as a manifestation of universal norms and values (interview, Dakar, January 2011):

> We took some of the principles that you find in seven of the major instruments—when you look at those principles they really line up with moral norms, and values of people all over the world […] And those are some things we ask in the class and then we say, what do your traditional values say about this, would traditional culture agree that everyone has the right to be free from all forms of discrimination?

This understanding brings to mind Kothari's view of human rights as 'a movement in search of a theory' (Kothari 1991) where the starting point is the doctrine itself, which the advocate seeks to find a theoretical justification for in practice (referred to by Bourdieu [1977: 79] as the 'genesis amnesia' of human rights ideologues). Melching's statement displays a teleological approach to the human rights doctrine, and assumes human rights to be as self-evident as they are universal.

However, the dominant discourse on rights represented here has particular cultural, historical and philosophical underpinnings based on a particular, positivist idea of humanity and the individual (Hunt 2007). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the basis for international human rights conventions and the philosophical foundation for Tostan's programme. Article 1 states that, 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.' As Langlois (2009: 16) notes, 'a quick perusal of the Declaration is sufficient for the reader to recognise all the main elements of liberal political theory expressed in the idioms of first and second generation rights.' He observes that rights language did not appear 'out of a vacuum,' but had 'developed gradually through Western political history, reaching its first golden age in the European Enlightenment,' a period which saw the culmination of the development of the idea of individual liberty in European thought (ibid.: 12). This emergence of specific ideas about society, individuality, liberty, government and the divine were to lay the groundwork for the 'rights of man,' as they appeared in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789). Both of these declarations enumerated rights deemed to be 'self-evident' and 'inalienable.' However, historian Lynn Hunt argues that these claims give rise to the 'paradox of self-evidence,' i.e. that an assertion that requires argument is not self-evident (Hunt 2007: 19). Her historical analysis of the body and its relation to the genesis of 'human rights' in Europe and the United States demonstrates the normative origins of the doctrine, emerging from the natural law tradition and 19th century European liberal political theories (Hunt 2004; 2007).

Melching's interpretation of human rights principles as reflecting 'moral norms and values of people all over the world' is a representation of the 'moral fundamentalism' defined by Robert Baker (1998: 201) in his discussion of bioethics as 'the theory that cross-cultural moral judgments and international bioethical codes are justified by certain "basic" or "fundamental" moral principles that are universally accepted in all cultures and eras.' Baker discusses ignorance as a lack of knowledge of fundamental principles, i.e. that there can be no acceptance of moral principles, without first having knowledge of them: 'it is meaningless to claim that someone accepts or agrees to an obligation if they are ignorant of that obligation, or cannot understand it, or expressly deny it' (ibid.).

Tostan's goal of instilling knowledge of human rights doctrine in its participants is clearly a social and political project as much as it is a presupposition, representing a particular vision of human nature and human potentiality that combines social, historical, political and moral elements. Legal scholar Makau Mutua refers to such international NGOs as 'conventional doctrinists' because 'they are marked by a heavy and almost exclusive reliance on positive law in treaties and other sources of international law' (Mutua 2001: 151). He argues that 'by taking cover behind the international human rights instruments, international NGOs are able to fight for liberal values without appearing partisan, biased, or ideological' (ibid.: 157). Similarly, Michael Freeman argues that in order to avoid charges of moral imperialism, human rights advocates may seek 'to vindicate the philosophical correctness of their position,' by examining the foundations of their beliefs, but warns that the philosophical foundations they hope for may be 'chimerical' (Freeman 1994: 495). He challenges those who would wish to produce a 'philosophically defensible list of human rights' to offer one 'derived from a moral account of human nature, which must in turn be philosophically defended.' He finds that most advocates instead offer an 'indirect justification' of such a list of rights, based only on a 'plausible and attractive account of human nature' (ibid.). In practice, Tostan actors tend to steer clear of philosophical foundations in favour of pointing to the apparent consensus on the doctrine, e.g. Melching's statement that 'the human rights principles line up with moral norms and people around the world,' focusing instead on ways of translating the ideas in ways meaningful to their participants.

## Changing culture, changing social norms

Roderick Stirrat observes that 'changing hearts and minds is at the core of development practice' (Stirrat 2008: 416). Comparing contemporary NGOs with the colonial-era missionary movement,

he maintains that the former require the people constituting the targets of their interventions to 'change their ways of seeing the world, organizing the world, acting in the world and organizing society' (ibid.). The commonality of Tostan's purpose with this movement to change the cultures of others is highlighted in a 2007 article in the *Chicago Tribune,* reporting the endorsement by Ann Veneman, then-Executive Director of UNICEF, of Tostan's information-bearing work, as well as her understanding of FGC as an ancient 'cultural practice' (Reaves 2007):

> The thing about Tostan's approach is that they respect culture… so many organisations go in and preach, 'Just Say No.' This is a 2,000-year-old cultural practice, and that's not going to happen. But Tostan gives the population information about health, and goes from there.

Tostan's 'culturally respectful' (Tostan 2011c) model is lauded in this way in international development, feminist and policy-making circles for its work to induce behaviour change leading to the abandonment of FGC. In collaboration with political theorist Gerry Mackie, Tostan has created a game theoretic model of behaviour change based on Schelling's convention theory (1960) and a modified rational choice model, using a comparison with the cessation of footbinding in 19th century China, to explain the ability of its programme to apparently induce behaviour change among target communities (Mackie 1996). The key premise is that a 'critical mass' of people must pledge to cease practising FGC and also forbid their sons to marry 'uncut' women. Accordingly (the theory goes), if the social necessity to undergo FGC is removed, then public pressure can result in a 'critical mass' of change triggering the general cessation of the practice. In his paper entitled *Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account,* Mackie uses the Schelling convention theory to illustrate the concept of a 'critical mass' in behaviour change, giving an example of interdependent decision-making in Sweden's 1967 decision to change from driving on the left to driving on the right (Mackie 1996).

The idea of a creating a 'critical mass' of people within a given group to decide to change a social norm or convention, subsequently leading the whole group to change its behaviour, has become the theoretical cornerstone of Tostan's intervention. Melching frequently cites this theory when giving presentations to the agencies and institutions to whom she represents her organisation, and the Tostan norms-based model has been incorporated into the official approaches to FGC abandonment of UNICEF, among others. When I began work with Tostan in 2007, the terminology Tostan used in relation to the model was of 'social conventions' and Gerry Mackie's work with Tostan on 'changing harmful social conventions' (see Mackie 1996; 2000; 2003).

According to Mackie (who, in the process of analysing FGC practices homogenises them in terms of type and rationale), both footbinding and FGC are 'self-enforcing conventions' because, in the societies where they occurred (he claims), the main goal of all women is to marry, and both practices are seen as necessary to ensuring women's marriageability (1996).[19] He argues that the same social processes that create and sustain both types of practice can potentially bring about their abandonment and he cites Tostan's successes as proof of this theory (Mackie 2000).

Around 2009, Tostan began to use the term 'social norms' rather than 'social conventions,' while continuing to underpin its model by a game theoretic understanding of human decision-making. As Melching stated (interview, Dakar, January 2011):

> My way of describing this now, positive social transformation, would be quite different, because if you look at social transformation, I think the way we describe it now through years of working on changing social traditions and social constructions such as behaviour that would lead to people achieving their goals… now we talk in terms of the moral norms and the social norms and… legal norms.

Melching has been influenced by philosopher of economics and UNICEF consultant Cristina Bicchieri, 'whose interest in norms is strongly influenced by research in experimental economics and, especially, by the way in which compliance can be elicited in experimental settings' (Dubrueil and Grégoire 2013). Bicchieri has joined Mackie in becoming a 'Tostan partner' (Tostan 2012b) and she and Melching have made presentations together on social norms, FGC and Tostan's programme at international events.

It is not within the remit of this thesis to offer an in-depth philosophical interrogation of social norms theory (see Elster 1989; Dubrueil and Grégoire 2013). Instead, in the following section I briefly outline the theory as it relates to Tostan, showing how it is employed by the NGO in its discourse as a way simultaneously to frame and give credibility (particularly at the policy-making level) to its efforts to induce social and behavioural change in Africa. Supported by the authoritative voice of the academy, employing the technical language of economics, philosophy and mathematics, Tostan's partnership with academic theorists and its harnessing of a model of behaviour based on social norms theory offers mutual advantage to both parties: Tostan's work is given scientific credence, while the academics gain credibility for their theories through the

[19] A study carried out in the Senegambia region by Shell Duncan et al. (2010) somewhat contradicts this thesis, suggesting that FGC is a 'peer convention' rather than a 'marriage convention,' as 'many men, from both circumcising and non-circumcising families, are willing to marry uncircumcised women' (ibid.: v).

empirical evidence offered by the NGO's reported successes 'in the field.' In the sections that follow I analyse how the NGO's discourse on social norms and behaviour change is applied to issues of political orthodoxy such as FGC, whereby the transmission of scientific 'facts' and human rights 'knowledge' are used in attempts to change social norms in Senegal.

## Social norms, game theory and the transmission of 'good information'

> I attended a UNICEF conference last May featuring Cristina Bicchieri, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who wrote a great book entitled: 'The Grammar of Society.' She explained that social norms are most often followed not because people have consciously chosen to do so, but rather because of the expectations of the others in the group. In some cases, people may very much want to abandon FGC but do not want to bring this up in public for fear of being seen as 'traitors to their culture' in the eyes of others. Many people in the same group may secretly want to abandon but do not realize others also want to abandon and so continue to practice or refuse to admit they have abandoned so as not to feel the disapproval of society. This is what Professor Biccieri [sic] terms: 'pluralistic ignorance.'
>
> Molly Melching, online discussion (Population Reference Bureau 2009)

Bicchieri's theory of social norms is outlined in her book, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (Bicchieri 2006), wherein she posits that human decision-making is based on behavioural (social) rules; social norms are 'the rules we live by' (ibid.: 1). In addition to making a contribution to theories of human behaviour (especially decision-making), Bicchieri is strongly concerned with the application of her interpretation of social norms to policy, with the aim of changing behaviours considered undesirable, and inducing 'pro-social' behaviours: 'The idea that social norms may be cued, and hence manipulated, is attractive. It suggests that we may be able to induce pro-social behaviour and maintain social order at low cost' (Bicchieri 2006: 7). Bicchieri's understanding of social norms focuses on the role of expectations in people's behaviour, of which she identifies two types: empirical expectations ('what we expect others to do') and normative expectations ('what we believe others think we ought to do') (Bicchieri and Xiao 2009: 191). She cites examples of 'games' that social norms theory can be applied to as 'mixed-motive games that can be 'solved' (or better, 'transformed') by norms of fairness, reciprocity, promise-keeping etc., such as the Prisoner's Dilemma, the Trust Game and Ultimatum games' (Bicchieri 2006: 3).

Game theory has been defined as 'the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between intelligent rational decision-makers' (Myerson 1991: 1), and has been applied to a range of theoretical fields, especially economics, political science and evolutionary biology (Leonard 1995). The development of game theory can be traced to the publication in 1944 of von Neumann and Morgenstern's *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour,* which saw the theory begin to unfold at a pan-disciplinary level. Game theory is understood in philosophy as 'the study of the ways in which strategic interactions among *economic agents* produce outcomes with respect to the preferences (or *utilities*) of those agents, where the outcomes in question might have been intended by none of the agents' (Ross 2012, emphasis added). Game theory was originally trialled by US scientists at the RAND Corporation during the 1950s as a way of solving problems of warfare and decision-making, and has since come to define US military strategy, beginning during the Cold War with the development of the game-theory based doctrine of nuclear deterrence through mutually assured destruction (Twing 1998). R.J. Leonard argues that the application of set theories and combinatorial methods such as game theory 'is best understood as part of the general emergence in the 20th century of *structuralist* analysis across the scientific spectrum' (Leonard 1995: 731, emphasis in original).

Game theory has thus come to be applied to social behaviours and institutions as part of this 'synchronic, formal, logical analysis of structure' (ibid.), with the underlying assumption being the existence of a utility-maximising and rational *homo economics,* as well as a Kantian expectation that all people are fundamentally capable of reasoning in the same manner and on the same level. A 2005 published interview with Tostan founder Melching reports that 'behavioural shift within the group, as predicted by game theory, is predicated not only on what the rational actor wants to do, but on how he or she thinks others will behave' (Kasdon 2005: 72). The growing popularity of this type of understanding of human behaviour and decision-making in relation to African female genital alteration practices is evident in the evolution of the technical language used in policy documents by both Tostan and its partners such as UNICEF, who aim to 'leverage human dynamics' to induce a desired change in behaviour, in this case, the abandonment of FGC (UNICEF 2013).

As the quote at the beginning of this section from Melching illustrates, she now uses terms such as 'pluralistic ignorance' (Bicchieri 2006: 186) to explain why people who have been exposed to information about the potential harmful effects of FGC still continue to practice it, even if (as is believed by the interveners) they now wish to stop. According to Melching, pluralistic ignorance

can be defined as 'social fear' (Skoll World Forum 2012): people assume that they are alone in wishing to stop, while simultaneously fearing the sanction ('being seen as "traitors to their culture"') of everyone else in the group (whom they assume wish to continue), if they do so (ibid.). Under Bicchieri's theoretical model, practices such as FGC are viewed in isolation from their cultural context as 'suboptimal norms' based upon pluralistic ignorance (Bicchieri 2006). Eliminating these 'suboptimal norms' is seen as contingent on collective action, to be induced by policymakers aiming to induce 'pro-social behaviour' (ibid.). This can be achieved, according to the theory, by giving people particular information that will convince them to stop practising, while simultaneously changing their expectations about how others will behave following the receipt of this information. In the Tostan case, 'moral norms' are also brought to bear in this process, the theory being that broader moral norms (which 'all communities aspire to—things like peace, wellbeing and security,' according to Melching [interview, Dakar, January 2011]) serve to underpin social norms such as FGC, and that once a group comes to realise that FGC is not necessary for the preservation of the moral norm, they will cease to practice it.

In Tostan discourse, the international human rights instruments are examples of such 'moral norms,' universally applicable. Melching explained Tostan's role in this regard to me as follows (interview, Dakar, January 2011):

> The human rights principles line up with moral norms and people around the world… This is what the whole role of Tostan is – is to help people open a dialogue in a very constructive way, in a very positive way, not through judgment or criticism, but starting where they are, listening to them, listening to what they want and what their moral norms are and helping them to ask questions that lead them to think are those social constructs that may have come down over the past a thousand years, are those social behaviours really helping us to achieve our more important moral norms…. again we always say that the moral norms are pretty much universal over the world, that we do no harm, and when you do do harm you will be punished, by society. And where there was this huge gap, was the social norms [sic].

In an interview undertaken around the same time (January 2011), Ethan, Tostan's Director of Communications (an American based in the Washington, D.C. office) explained his understanding of the link between human rights, moral norms and behaviour change as follows, emphasising what he sees as the equivalence of human rights doctrine with 'moral norms,' structures which he regards as ubiquitous across culture and time:

> Well what Tostan's approach showed is that - actually these are norms that people are following, to help their daughters succeed, to become successful. And I think that that

> was perhaps misguided, that they weren't fully informed on the health consequences, or the potential health consequences. Human rights are basically a list of moral norms. We didn't invent that in the 1940s, those have been around since, I mean… the Greeks and before that. So, I think we also need to be careful on that point that, we're not assuming that Africans never thought about how human society should behave.
>
> When you find social change of a norm, the only time change really happens is when you can convince other people to join you. And so I think that's one of Tostan's big insights. So for me, it's the approach, of being respectful, of not judging people and assuming that they're doing this to harm their daughters, when the reverse is true.

Both of these senior figures in the organisation (also aunt and nephew, respectively) employ the concept of universal 'norms' to explain the behaviour of those practising FGC, understanding human rights doctrine as a type of 'moral norm' which can be channelled to unseat the ill-conceived social norm of FGC. In this schema, the idea of 'moral norms' offers a Kantian understanding of moral laws as universal and necessary practical laws. Kant's deontological ethical theory of 'moral autonomy' is also reflected in this understanding, with moral autonomy as a bivalent property that Kant argued was possessed by all rational beings by virtue of their rationality (Reath 2006). Underlying the Tostan philosophy expressed above we see a particular view of the individual, who acts on reason, motivated by a Kantian idea of 'moral autonomy' ('autonomy of the will') (ibid.). This 'autonomy of the will' involves 'not only a capacity for choice that is motivationally independent, but a lawgiving capacity that is independent of determination by external influence and is guided by its own internal principle–in other words, by a principle that is constitutive of lawgiving' (Reath 2006: 154). This understanding ascribes a metaphysical quality to the doctrine of human rights; it thus makes metaphysical claims about the nature of humanity.

Whatever the relevance of Tostan's theory and its applicability on a larger scale, inspired by the Malicounda event, the language of social norms is used by senior Tostan actors to lend authority and credibility to their public message and to offer a scientific framework as an understanding to outsiders of behaviours deemed incomprehensible to them. Perceived insider understandings of people's behaviour in Senegal is coupled with this scientific approach to give credibility to their work, while also giving empirical credence to the work of academic theorists such as Bicchieri and Mackie who write about social behaviours.

## 'Saving mothers': Confronting 'tradition' with 'information'

The above approach is illustrated by a conference panel entitled 'Saving Mothers, a Surprising Solution' at the 2013 Women in the World summit in New York, when Melching, speaking with the insider voice of authority she employs to accompany her experience of almost four decades in Senegal, tells of the 'secrecy' surrounding pregnancy in the country. The panel at this glittering corporate-sponsored event included a US fashion model turned philanthropist, the president of an American pharmaceutical company, and a Malawian so-called tribal leader and activist. At this forum, Melching cited the 'hiding' of pregnancy as part of a grander scheme of 'traditions' to explain why rural women in Senegal may experience problems with pregnancy: 'they try to hide it … traditions such as a woman who is pregnant is expected to work even harder, she must show that she's courageous, that she's not gonna get tired' (The Daily Beast 2013). She told of a mother-in-law forcing a woman who had miscarried three times to work extra hard during pregnancy as her child would not be successful if she didn't 'work hard and show how courageous you are' (ibid.). She frames this narrative in terms of social norms and lack of 'information,' stating:

> So you're up against these kinds of entrenched social norms… we understand that women need information, in their own language… these are women who have never been to school, who don't understand, and they think they're bewitched, they think there are evil forces working against them and so they're trying to protect themselves in other ways, and once they get this information, it really changes everything. (ibid.)

This apportioning of causality for problems such as maternal mortality in Senegal to lack of information and social norms is a common iteration by the Tostan founder, adding confidently here that, 'if one woman wants to go against the tradition, she will be crushed' (ibid.). The notion tacitly communicated is that the healthcare facilities are available, but women are ignorant of these facilities or mysteriously forbidden by tradition from accessing them; getting 'information' then 'changes everything' for them.

Indeed, Melching makes no mention in this presentation of the fact that access to medical care is less and less affordable in Senegal following the reform of the healthcare system in the neoliberal era, which has seen 'the social contract between states and citizens concerning the state's role in providing high-quality, low-cost primary health care change dramatically… a fundamental shift away from the global promise of "health for all by the year 2000" made by the world's governments in 1978' (Foley 2010: 5). Following a 6-month period of fieldwork at a fairly typical *poste de santé* (health post) in rural Senegal that was rarely used by villagers, I concluded from

discussion with local actors that they did not use the facility primarily because they could not afford the upfront fees and medication; many did not see much point in attending the health centre in any event as it was so under-resourced and under-staffed.

As described in the introduction to this thesis, neoliberal reforms (particularly of the health system) in Senegal have seen a dramatic reduction in government spending in the name of attaining economic growth, with the government of Senegal spending just $12 per person on healthcare per annum (Foley 2010). These reforms have seen the instigation of a 'user pays' health system in Senegal, at a time when more and more people struggle to secure basic necessities, while the prices of food staples and fuel have soared. The portrayal above of women's health issues in Senegal is typical of what Ellen Foley (2009: 62) refers to as the 'moralising discourses associated with health reform [that] hold individuals accountable for their health status,' an understanding that deflects attention from the political and economic factors contributing to health disparities. 'Social norms,' 'tradition,' and lack of 'information' are instead offered as palatable and conveniently apolitical causes for situations of inequality of access to biomedical healthcare, or perceived breaches of human rights, while the diverse knowledge frameworks that inform social and health practices are disregarded.

Foley's ethnography of health practices in the St Louis region of northern Senegal shows that in relation to health decisions, 'rather than conceive of biomedicine, Islam, and local therapeutic traditions as bounded or mutually exclusive health systems, patients and their families easily navigate among different conceptions of prevention, etiology, and treatment, and employ many health strategies simultaneously' (2010: 114). Similarly, I found during field work that in contrast to Melching's portrayal of decision-making as based on a lack of information, people's decisions about which health strategy to employ—ranging from *garaabu tuubab* (White person's medicine) to *garaabu olof* (Wolof medicine)—involve a complex set of knowledge frameworks informed by advice from public health officials such as my host 'father' Ousmane (a village-based district health nurse), popular culture and the media, diverse local notions of prevention and cure, and religious prescriptions. Melching's reading of Senegalese ideas of common sense made no acknowledgment of the social construction of knowledge itself, including her own 'common sense' understanding of health practices that are based on a limited biomedical view of health and prevention. As Foley (2010: 110) observes, in Senegal, 'evil eye and tongue; jealous neighbours, friends, and family; witches, sorcerers, and spirits are all part of the social world' and people therefore take the necessary precautions to protect themselves.

The specialist, academic language of social norms used strategically by Tostan, coupled with narratives portrayed as stemming from insider insight to local cultures, as well as the promulgation of neutral 'information,' are the techniques the NGO uses to enhance its credibility to external parties. This approach helps to gain financial and political support for its programme; following Melching's presentation on the evils of 'tradition' at the conference above, she was accorded a 'Women of Impact' award, accompanied by a $25,000 cheque. These kinds of representations to international audiences are an example of what Merry refers to as NGOs' role as 'translators' of transnational human rights doctrine who 'negotiate the middle in a field of power and opportunity' (Merry 2006: 42); in the case above, Melching translates 'up' her ideas about local practices in the context of human rights.

## Travelling to the 'village of knowledge': Tostan's pedagogy and values

> Programmes presuppose that the real is programmable, that it is a domain subject to certain determinants, rules, norms and processes that can be acted upon and improved by authorities. They make the objects of government thinkable in such a way that their ills appear susceptible to diagnosis, prescription and cure by calculating and normalising intervention.
>
> (Rose and Miller 1992: 183)

Having introduced the history and ideology of Tostan, I now draw on Tostan's pedagogical materials to investigate the specific types of knowledge and values it aims to impart through its human rights-based programme, focusing on programme content and teaching methods. Through these materials, I analyse the understanding of personhood implicit in Tostan's approach, following Jack Donnelly's (1982: 209) observation that the notion of the human person is central to the concept of human rights. (Except where otherwise indicated, I refer primarily to Tostan's unpublished *Kobi 1 Guide du Facilitateur;*[20] all translations are my own from the French, and page numbers are indicated).

According to Tostan's *Kobi* Guide the anticipated result of the programme is to ensure participants 'lead a more active and more productive life' (*Kobi 1*, page 1). Specifically, the 'expected outputs' of the programme (as reported at a 2007 French-language presentation by the

[20] The Kobi 1 Facilitators' Guide was originally put together and is constantly revised by a Tostan team including the Director, a Programme Coordinator, and volunteers.

Coordinator of the Monitoring and Evaluation department in Dakar, entitled 'Measuring the success of the abandonment of excision') are as follows:

- Increase participants' knowledge about the topic of excision, and its disadvantages
- Awareness-raising initiatives carried out within participant communities and the wider social network
- Inter-village meetings to plan social mobilisation activities to promote the abandonment of excision
- Public declarations for the abandonment of excision and early/child marriage
- Radio programmes on the topic of excision

The detailed 160-page *Kobi* Guide is used by the field staff implementing the programme (the facilitators, who live in the village for the duration of the three-year programme) to teach the curriculum. As part of the 'consensual elaboration of class norms,' in the opening session the facilitator tells the class a short tale entitled '*En Route to the Village of Knowledge'* (page 3). In this parable, four siblings decide to travel together to the 'village of knowledge.' The travellers encounter obstacles on the way, leading all but one of them to give up on the journey. The story ends as follows (ibid.):

> Only Marietou did not complain. She was equally tired, but as she had decided to undertake the journey, she continued with determination and enthusiasm. She stayed focused on her objective. Her attitude helped her to continue joyously on the path. She had made sacrifices, but she knew that she would be proud of her achievement once she had reached the village of knowledge.

In this schema, knowledge is represented as a destination to be reached (the 'village of knowledge'), and once participants persist to their destination via a process of knowledge acquisition—Kant's exhortation '*sapere aude!*' (dare to know!) offering the philosophical impulse here—they inevitably come to the conclusion that practices such as 'female genital cutting' are harmful. They then cease the practice, according to the Tostan theory. Reaching the village of knowledge involves learning about 'the organisation of society; human rights and responsibilities; democratic behaviours; and problem-solving processes' (page 17). Participants are told that they will be taught subjects including democracy, hygiene, health, literacy, arithmetic, how to write SMS messages on mobile phones, income-generating activities, and management; the assumption is that participants lack these types of knowledge, and should acquire it. The guide instructs the facilitator to tell the class that these things signify 'positive changes' and 'an improvement in living conditions' (page 1). Participants are told that they will get a diploma at the end of the programme if they have learned, shared and applied their 'new'

knowledge (page 13).

The introductory *Kobi* sessions outline the aims of the programme, highlighting 'the importance of participation' (page 7). However, the facilitator is instructed to explicitly demand consensus, e.g. 'ask them to have a group consensus in relation to their expectations and hopes' (page 2). Almost every question in the facilitator's guidebook is followed by an answer in brackets following each one, clearly included for the facilitator to elicit from the class. For example, in an early session the facilitator is instructed to have the participants close their eyes and imagine their community as they would like to see it in five years' time. They are then told to represent this pictorially on sheets of paper. The facilitator is informed by the *Guide* that the participants 'may' include examples such as:

> A health centre, a school, a market, a water source, a gardening project, two people holding hands, a cultural activity, beautiful houses, roads, light and electricity, factories, a mosque, playgrounds, sports, a white dove, a carpenter, etc. (page 11)

The facilitator is instructed to ask questions in order to 'stimulate ideas,' such as 'Where do the children play? What about health? And employment?' S/he is then instructed to tell the group that other Tostan classes in many African countries have also described their 'ideal community,' and then reads out the following from the *Guide*:

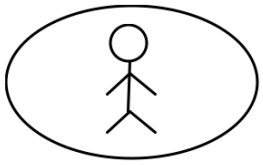
> In other communities, people said there would be drinking water, electricity, employment, food, roads, learning centres, educated people, decent houses, gardens, communication centres, a healthy and clean environment, healthy people, health services, peace, freedom, social infrastructures, cultural activities, sports activities, play areas for young children, solidarity, generosity, justice for all, democracy, religious activities, respect for persons and property, respect for the elderly, and the existence of many associations. (ibid.)

Writing about Tostan's teaching methods, its Director claims that the organisation is 'diametrically opposed to' the 'authoritarian pedagogy' of the French-modelled school system in Senegal (Gillespie and Melching 2010: 484). She points to the organisation's use of language as evidence for this, such as the employment of the terms 'facilitator' instead of 'teacher,' and 'participant' instead of 'student.' Melching states that facilitators are trained to 'unlearn stereotypes of the teacher as authority and the student as passive recipient' through 'reflective exercises that encourage them to look at learning in terms of everyday life situations and to identify structural power relationships that might adversely affect full participation and equal interactions between learners' (ibid.). However, the training materials cited above somewhat belie

this notion of reflectiveness and reflexivity, as both questions *and* answers are provided for the facilitator's interactions with participants: each question is followed in brackets by *'the participants may say….'* Assuming that the pedagogy of the *école française* with which both the facilitator and participants are familiar[21] is indeed as 'authoritarian' and deeply embedded in learners' consciousness as Melching suggests above, then both groups risk falling into the trap of thinking that these are the 'correct' answers, to be elicited and internalised. Indeed, the prescriptive approach detailed above feeds off the very power dynamic (teacher-students) Tostan claims to avoid, leaving little room for disagreement or alternative voices.

Continuing the analysis of the *Kobi* programme content, I turn to Session 4 of the *Guide,* entitled 'Who am I? What is my place in the world?' (page 14). The aim of the session is that on completion, participants will be able to 'explain their place within their families, within their communities, and within the world,' and 'explain the importance and responsibility of human beings living together in the world' (ibid.).

The facilitator is instructed to draw the following image on the blackboard to illustrate the theme (page 15):



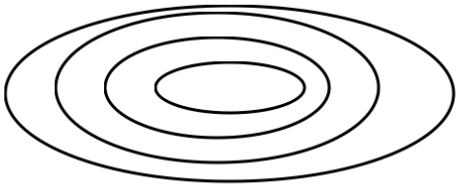
As evident in this depiction, the philosophical point of departure is an atomised individual. The facilitator then asks participants to consider their relationships with the rest of the world, beginning with 'our close environment' and moving progressively towards the 'more distant environment.' To do this, the facilitator must ask the following questions, with the answers to be elicited included in brackets (page 16):

- What is our closest environment? (Our family)
- What is the role of the individual within the family? (Father, eldest son, youngest daughter etc.)

[21] Facilitators usually have several years of formal schooling, whereas participants tend to have had varying experience of formal education, from little or none to a few years.

- After the family, what is there? (Our community)
- What is the role of the person within his/her community? (A leader, a women's leader, a facilitator etc.)
- After the community, what is there? (Our country)
- What is the role of the person in relation to his country? (A citizen, an elected representative, a religious leader, a regional representative, a singer, etc.)
- After the country, what is there? (the continent: Africa)
- What is the role of the person in relation to the continent? (An African)
- After the continent, what is there? (The world)
- What is the role of the person in relation to the world? (A human being. A citizen of the world who has the same rights and duties as all human beings)

As each question is asked, an additional circle is drawn around the figure on the blackboard, as follows (ibid.):



The facilitator then explains from the *Guide* that:

> An individual is small compared to the rest of the world, and the world is a very large community in which we all live. However, each person can play an important role in this world. Each person can have a positive influence on his/her environment, beginning with the family environment that is the closest, and moving to the global environment that is further away. (ibid.)

He/she then elicits examples of 'people who have had a positive impact within your family, within the community, within the country, and within the world' (ibid.). Participants are then asked 'why is every human being important?' They are instructed to discuss the question in groups and to produce a song or poem in response (ibid.).

The vision of personhood depicted here has particular cultural, historical and philosophical underpinnings, based on a positivistic and particular idea of humanity and the individual, and as such sheds more light on the values and beliefs of the authors of the manual than it does on those of the participants themselves. This idea of personhood and the world aligns almost exactly with Stirrat's (2008: 414-415) analysis of some NGO workers as 'missionaries,' whose worldview:

> Involves a particular model of the person; of the person as an activist, a participating individual who is committed to changing society. The goal of their activities is the person

> who is free from social or other forms of constraint, who is empowered, who is no longer marginal or oppressed, whose knowledge is recognized as being as good as anyone else's. All of this is based on a concept of the social which is ultimately premised on the idea that society should consist of individuals entering into forms of social contract with each other which deny pre-existing forms of hierarchy, dependency or powerlessness. At the back of all this is the model of the 'individual' in the sense that has evolved in the post-Enlightenment West. Ultimately it is an idea of a strangely asocial, acultural, universalized person.

According to Stirrat, such a stream of thought, while attempting to be respectful of cultural difference and indigenous knowledge, is not and cannot be so, as it is 'a universalising force based on universalistic assumptions about the nature of the person as a free agent, a conscious decision-maker, a consumer in the malls of development' (2008: 415). He argues that the most striking aspect of this vision of the person is its modernity and the weight it places on a modern vision of the free individual, and that despite the invocation of the importance of 'community' within this rhetoric, it 'necessarily involves the destruction of any form of the social which is not based on a Hobbesian notion of the social contract' (ibid.). The emphasis on the individual as a definable identity illustrated above juxtaposes the precariousness of individuality with the necessity of its assertion, and brings to mind S.H. Kim's analysis of Max Weber's theories on modernity, the individual and rationalisation, arguing that 'Weber saw the irony that a modern individual citizen equipped with inviolable rights was born as a part of the rational, disciplinary ethos that increasingly penetrated into every aspect of social life' (Kim 2007).

Tostan's values are shown in these attempts to simultaneously instil in programme participants an individualistic, ahistorical 'planetary consciousness' of the type discussed above, through the idea expressed in the *Kobi* (page 16) that 'each person can have a positive influence on his/her environment, beginning with the family environment that is the closest, and moving to the global environment that is further away' values that reflect classical liberal thought. As Timothy Lynch observes, 'liberals are generally hopeful that the world can be and has been made better; progress is a self-evident liberal truth' (Lynch 2009: 48).

## Conclusion: Knowledge, ignorance, and power

> Tostan empowers the population. Once one person in a village knows what to do, and what not to do—for health, for FGC, in matters of what the earth can give to men—then you have given everything to this person.
>
> Ibrahima Mbengue, Bignona sub-prefect, 2009

> Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.
>
> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002: 2)

A recent article in the *Financial Times* states that Tostan provides 'value-neutral information so that villagers can draw their own conclusions' (Bedell 2014), conveying this type of knowledge as neutral and unburdened by belief, tradition, or superstition. As I have shown in this chapter, Tostan's game theory-inspired pedagogy attempts to use ideas of scientific knowledge, rationality and personhood, manifested within the international human rights doctrine, as value-free tools for 'social change,' particularly in relation to FGC practices. In this discourse, people suffer as a result of their lack of correct knowledge, whilst scientific and human rights knowledge leads to their enlightenment. Rationality and social progress (in the liberal sense) are the philosophical underpinnings of the intervention, and the vision of change communicated is one based on a positivist, 'rational actor' approach to a reified and homogenised idea of 'community,' part of an attempt to effect large-scale social transformation 'from the inside out' (Skoll World Forum 2013).

Hans Weiler (2009), writing about development and the politics of knowledge, argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power, particularly in the growing tendency for political decisions to be justified by reference to a particular body of knowledge. Similarly, I argue that Tostan's pedagogy, which places scientific knowledge and rational decision-making at the top of a hierarchy of knowledges (i.e. as 'good information,' as opposed to the malevolent 'traditions' or 'entrenched social norms' described by Melching), reflects this symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power, i.e. that 'knowledge legitimates power and, conversely, knowledge is legitimated by power' (Weiler 2009: 3). Weiler argues that the recognition of certain types of knowledge derives its strength from social and cultural circumstances as much as from the content of the knowledge itself. The scientific rationalism of the kind advocated by Tostan is, as Pierre Bourdieu observed:

> The rationalism of the mathematical models which inspire the policy of the IMF or the World Bank, that of the great law firms, great juridical multinationals which impose the traditions of American law on the whole planet, that of rational-action theories, etc., is both the expression and the justification of a Western arrogance, which leads people to act as if they had the monopoly of reason and could set themselves up as world policemen. (Bourdieu 1998: 25, my translation from the French)

As I have shown in this chapter, Tostan as an organisation was founded and operates on the basis of what Petras calls the 'idealist' of view of aid, a view that 'conceives of aid as a disinterested policy, divorced from the interests of the capitalist class and guided by humanitarian concerns, democratic values and economic well-being' (Petras 2004: 64-65). Such idealists 'dissociate their discussion of aid from the historical-structural context in which it is embedded and argue in terms of normative values and the degree of compliance with those values [by recipients]' (ibid.).

Within statements such as Melching's assertion that, 'when people are educated, when they have the information they need, when they have human rights and they know their rights, when they are working together... I think we will see a huge change in the world' (Wallace 2011), the implicit assumption is made that people do not have 'the information they need' and that this must be transmitted to them. The understanding here is that undesirable outcomes are the result of poor decision-making based on ignorance, rather than political or socio-economic constraints. Here, the very act of imparting knowledge assumes an ignorance on the part of the receiver of that knowledge. However, by seeking to eliminate ignorance or impart knowledge, the teacher reifies the gap of knowledge/ignorance. Linsey McGoey (2012b), discussing Jacques Rancière's account of the ignorant schoolmaster, indicates the political potentialities of this gap. Rancière's schoolmaster unwittingly learns the 'sobering truth' that, 'the job of teachers, to explicate, to teach, to impart their knowledge, constantly cementing, through the guise of seeking to eradicate it, the gap between a master's knowledge and a student's ignorance—was more dispensable and extraneous than he had thought' (McGoey 2012b: 9). According to Rancière, the schoolmaster's revelation was that 'explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. On the contrary, that very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world. It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around' (Rancière 1991: 6 in ibid.). Tostan's existence and operation is thus predicated on filling a gap of knowledge that it reifies through the very act of attempting to transmit knowledge, and through the discourses employed by its founder and programme participants, it reinforces the existence of the knowledge gap in the minds of both participants and external actors.

Taking up this theme, in Chapters 3 and 4 I explore the politics and policies behind debates and practices related to FGC, highlighting the role of 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2012a, 2012b) within the complex social and political dynamics of its movement to abandon FGC in Senegal.

# Chapter 3

## Situating the FGC intervention: Culture and Politics Within Global Debates on Genital Cutting

> Senegal is also a country on the verge of immense social change. I am talking about change so profound that it will have a lasting impact on the lives of generations of girls and women to come. I truly believe that we are at a point where in a few years Senegal may be able to say that it is a country free from a practice that disempowers women and girls and violates their human rights, the harmful practice of female genital cutting (FGC).
>
> Molly Melching (2012b)

### Introduction

This chapter frames Tostan within a wider epistemological and ideological movement that, I argue, re-defines women's health and reifies FGC as a 'harmful traditional practice' via self-referential debates of a largely ethnocentric nature. As part of the commitment of this research to 'study up' (as well as 'across' and 'down,' Nader 1972), I analyse the politics of, and contradictions within these global debates on FGC that have led to the definition of all customary genital cutting practices carried out on females in Africa as a human rights violation, thereby highlighting the socio-cultural specificities that characterise hegemonic discourses on genital cutting. I locate Tostan's official position within this movement, arguing that despite official organisational affirmations to the contrary, its project is culturally, politically and ideologically rooted in Euro-American beliefs about health and sexuality, and reflective of contemporary politics about external intervention in the lives of people in Africa.

### 'The time is now, the place is Senegal': globalised debates on FGC

As described in Chapter 2, for Tostan, the existence of FGC practices is understood as resulting from the lack of a particular type of knowledge ('good information'), perhaps reflecting the view that practitioners suffer from 'false consciousness' due to their lack of said knowledge. As

Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002: 352) note:

> Women's voluntary adoption of what are considered to be patriarchal practices are often explained by feminists in terms of false consciousness, or an internalisation of patriarchal social values by those who live within the asphyxiating confines of traditional societies. Even those analyses that demonstrate the workings of women's subversive agency in the enactment of social conventions remains circumscribed within the singular logic of subordination and insubordination.

An excerpt from a 2008 internal grant proposal illustrates this idea about the need to acquire certain 'correct' knowledge: 'In 2003, 118 Jola Fonyi communities came together at a joyous public declaration against the abandonment of excision in Oulampen. Shortly afterwards, other communities began to *ask for information* about the abandonment of FGC' (my translation from the French, emphasis added).

Tostan's information transfer approach in local languages using a human rights framework is now considered a best practice model by international institutions such as UNICEF for the elimination of FGC practices in Africa, as it promises 'abandonment within a generation' (UNICEF 2007) via 'non-judgemental, inclusive dialogue' (Tostan 2014b). Senegal, the home of Tostan's intervention, is thus 'on the verge of immense social change' according its founder, Molly Melching, in an article penned by her in the *Huffington Post* entitled 'The Time is Now, the Place is Senegal' (Melching 2012b). The change Melching predicts is the abandonment in Senegal in the near future of 'the harmful practice of female genital cutting' by the approximately one quarter of the population that practices it, as a result of her organisation's 'transformative education programme' (ibid.).[22]

A vast literature, both academic and applied, exists on FGC and within which Tostan's approach now features strongly (e.g. Hernlund and Shell-Duncan 2007; Johnson 2003). Across this literature, the female body is frequently the site of ideological conflict. Discourses surrounding the practices have historically ranged from the 'horrified responses' of colonial missionaries and the 'outraged sensibilities' of Western[23] feminists and activists, to 'providing anti-colonialists

[22] The most recent Demographic and Health Survey for Senegal concludes that 26% of women in Senegal had undergone FGC (DHS 2012: 294). FGC is most prevalent among the Mandinka (82%), and least prevalent among the Wolof (0.9%). The rate of FGC among the Jola, according to the survey, is 52% (*ibid*.: 295).

[23] Stuart Hall (2002: 56) acknowledged the difficulty in answering the question 'where and what is 'the "West"?' and posited that the construct is a historical and linguistic, rather than a geographical one. Although very limited and limiting in its use, and acknowledging how the term homogenises a diverse body

with fuel for nationalist struggles' (James 1998: 1033). FGC has become a topic of ever-increasing popular and political interest, especially in the West, despite claims to the contrary (a 2013 document published by the UK Department for International Development entitled '*Business Case and Summary on FGM/C in Africa and Beyond*' claims that, 'FGM/C is a highly neglected area, and progress towards ending the practice has been hindered by too little attention, evidence, commitment and resources,' DFID 2013).

FGC practices initially came under the global political spotlight in the 1970s, although they had been raised for debate many decades prior in a number of countries including Kenya and Sudan, placing them 'on the front line of a "culture" war between "traditionalists" and "modernists"' (Griswold 1994: 111-12, cited in Boyle 2002). Since then, a plethora of literature has been produced, and interventions of various kinds carried out globally, sparked by the 1978 publication of US feminist Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism,* followed by Fran Hosken's *Hosken Report* (1979). These works referred to the practices as the 'mutilation,' 'torture' and 'sexual castration' of women. The extreme language of these and other representations—including Alice Walker's 1993 film odyssey to The Gambia entitled *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women,* discussed in Chapter 2, considered by one critic to 'reproduce antiquated, even racist, images of Africa as a Hobbesian place of savage brutality in need of American healing' (Silverman 2004: 431)—in tandem with more sanitised 'scientific' descriptions such as 'infibulation' and 'clitoridectomy,' have served to fuel a judgment of unequivocal condemnation in the West that persists to the present day.

Elizabeth Heger Boyle (2002: 42) argues that the emerging feminist critiques that brought FGC to attention internationally were situated within the context of a 'constant expansion of individual rights and claims' serving to illustrate 'individual rights discourse conquering first national autonomy and then family inviolability.' Many of these feminist accounts situated the issue among discourses of power, individualism and self-interest (e.g. Daly 1978). Boyle argues that, on a subtle level, the assumption underpinning these discourses is that actions motivated by factors other than self-interest (e.g. religious or familial obligations) are in some way illegitimate, and that, with the ever-expanding notion of rights, rationalism and individualism will 'win out' over previous institutional and social structures (Boyle 2002). In her paper entitled *Embodied Imperialism*, Sonya Fernandez argues that these approaches reflect a trend towards 'social, legal

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of peoples, I follow Hall by using it as a 'tool to think with' and interpret it here as a simplified representation of societies of Euro-American heritage.

and academic orientalism' (Fernandez 2010).

A cohort of 'concerned research scholars, physicians, and policy experts' (that includes Sierra Leonean-American anthropologist Fuambai Ahmadu, who chose as an adult to undergo FGC in Sierra Leone as part of the Kono initiation rite), recently argued that 'media coverage of female genital modifications in Africa has been hyperbolic and one-sided, presenting them uniformly as mutilation and ignoring the cultural complexities that underlie these practices' (Abdulcadir et al. 2012: 19). Most media commentary in Europe and the United States (Tostan's donor regions) draws on sources from within the global activist and advocacy movement, with few alternative voices being reported, as women who have undergone 'FGM' are portrayed as 'victims' or 'survivors' in articles with emotive titles such as *'I Was Robbed of My Life'* (Trust.org 2012). By identifying the African woman as either silent victim or global womanist, thereby 'feeding into Western feminist accounts of oppressed "third world" women' (Kea and Roberts-Holmes 2012: 96), these narratives constitute Western subjectivities: 'like footbinding, plural marriage, and veiling, FGCs have been framed for Western audiences as both women's oppression and cultural depravity, potentially inspiring both feminist and exemplarist sentiment' (Wade 2009: 296).

## Health and sexuality within debates on FGC

These globalised debates incorporate concepts of the body, self, sexuality, family and morality, and play upon tensions related to cultural difference and the legacy of colonial-era depictions of gender relations in Africa (see Njambi 2004). They encompass a broad range of themes including culture, gender, colonialism and neo-colonialism, development, human rights, conceptions of the body, pain and the self, notions of tradition and modernity, and in particular, sexuality. As Johnsdotter and Essen note (2013: 6), 'social and cultural dimensions are integral to lived sexuality.' Vicki Kirby identifies the problem with applying Western understandings of sexuality to other cultural contexts:

> Although a whole battery of disciplinary practices (medical, pedagogical, familial, architectural, etc.) have produced what we take to be this essence of our personhood, we have reclaimed this cultural effect as a biological fact. Consequently, what has come to secure the 'truth' of Western bodies becomes problematic when it is used as a universal, explanatory grid: the pleasures and desires of a body situated in other histories and other cultures, may not be so readily comprehended. (Kirby 1987, cited in Bell 2005: 139)

Attention is now largely focused within FGC discourses on their presumed deleterious impacts on

women's health and sexual enjoyment. Whereas early outside intervention into the practices in Africa tended to focus on the former (Pederson 1991), Western feminism and science's turn to the clitoris as a site of female sexual pleasure, signifying the unencumbered individual in relation to the world (Harvey 2002; Laqueur 1990), influenced the shift in emphasis within anti-FGC campaigns from impacts on health, to sexual fulfilment. However, due to a lack of reliable, long-term data on both of these indicators—with ethnographic research by Obermeyer (1999; 2003), Abusharaf (2001) and Lightfoot-Klein (1989) belying hegemonic claims of inevitable damage to health and sexuality—as Duncan Wax argues, 'FGC has proven an empty template for the projection of Western conceptions of sex and sexuality and their relation to individual identity' (Wax 2006). Kirsten Bell criticises the tendency 'to homogenize female genital surgeries and to equate operations diverse in form and function with their most severe manifestations, while simultaneously reducing their meaning to patriarchy' (Bell 2005: 125). Johnsdotter and Essen (2013: 3) note the 'political impetus to exaggerate negative effects on sexuality' in the absence of rigorous research in support of such claims. Regarding health impacts, Carla Obermeyer's (1999: 91) systematic analysis thereof, entitled *Female Genital Surgeries: The Known, the Unknown, and the Unknowable,* notes that:

> It is rarely pointed out that the frequency and severity of complications are a function of the extent and circumstances of the operation, and it is not usually recognized that much of [our] information comes from studies of the Sudan, where most women are infibulated. The ill-health and death that these practices are thought to cause are difficult to reconcile with the reality of their persistence in so many societies, and raises the question of a possible discrepancy between our 'knowledge' of their harmful effects and the behavior of millions of women and their families.

Writing about the 'selective condemnation of cultural practices' Ehrenreich and Barr (2005: 76) argue that:

> Lambasting African societies and practices (while failing to critique similar practices in the United States), mainstream North American anti-FGC discourse simultaneously constructs the United States as civilized and sexually egalitarian, and North American genital cutting as safe, scientific, and defensible. It essentially implies that North American understandings of the body are 'scientific' (i.e., rational, civilized, and based on universally acknowledged expertise), while African understandings are 'cultural' (i.e., superstitious, uncivilized, and based on false, socially constructed beliefs).

## Human rights and the politics of global debates on FGC

By the 1990s, condemnations of FGC on the basis of health risks were increasingly replaced with arguments founded on the doctrine of universal human rights (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000:

25).[24] In this regard, global debates on FGC have now become in a sense 'non-debates,' I suggest, as the dominant consensus has become that female genital alteration practices in Africa of any type (whether performed on children or adults) are harmful and must be halted, with the 'debate' largely centring on questions of how and why this should happen. Indeed, the perceived evils of the practices and their eradication have now become a *cause célèbre* among global political elites. Henrietta Moore (2007: 327) contends that, 'female genital operations raise with particular force the question of the nature of politics in a globalized world,' an observation exemplified by the endorsement of Tostan by powerful political actors such as former US First Lady and later, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. Clinton's 'Remarks at the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation' at the US State Department in 2012 included discussion of her experience in Senegal with Tostan, and introduced Tostan founder Melching as, 'a real hero of mine, a friend of mine.' During this speech, Hillary Clinton warned sternly:

> Now we cannot excuse this as a cultural tradition. There are many cultural traditions that used to exist in many parts of the world that are no longer acceptable. We cannot excuse it as a private matter because it has very broad public implications. It has no medical benefits. It is, plain and simply, a human rights violation. (U.S. Department of State 2012b)

As posited in Chapter 2, this type of employment of the language of human rights indicates a belief in the universal existence and applicability of these rights across time and space, a belief increasingly appropriated by the powerful to ensure the erasure of all contrary expressions as 'excuses' (ibid.) In Clinton's speech, FGC practices are homogenised as a single anachronistic 'cultural tradition' of no value, as 'it' is considered to be without any 'medical benefit'; 'it' is 'no longer acceptable' in the presumably enlightened era of the present time (ibid.). In this speech, Clinton goes on to remark on 'the trauma FGC causes' and highlights how it has become a key issue for US foreign policy, which she claims now aims to enhance the role of women, presumed to be globally oppressed: 'So we're elevating this issue, but it's part of our overall elevation of the role of women and girls in our foreign policy economically, strategically, politically. Every aspect of our policy is intending to highlight and promote the role of women' (ibid.). She explicitly links the issue to what she views as 'the deeply-rooted gender inequalities that, either tacitly or actively, permit and promote such practices' and concludes by expressing the hope that, 'we can certainly see the abolition of this practice even sooner than within a generation' (ibid.).

[24] Tostan specifically states in its *Kobi 2* training manual (p. 136) that FGC violates the following rights: the right to health; the right to physical integrity; the right to be protected from all forms of violence; the right to be protected from all forms of discrimination.

Clinton's speech on this occasion followed on from her remarks at the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, when she opined that, 'it is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of female genital mutilation' (Antonazzo 2003: 471).

This endorsement by Hillary Clinton illustrates how Tostan and its founder has received the seal of approval for their work from the most powerful among political, corporate, and media figures, whose voices carry huge resonance in the globalised economy. The power of these voices serves to shut out alternative expressions and points of view, and stifle true expression on a global scale. The stated aim of safeguarding women's rights (and their assumed victimised and mutilated bodies), loftily proclaimed in Clinton's speech, is emblematic of the colonial continuities in such present-day 'imperial fictions' (Kabbani 1986). The logic of these declarations, I argue, illustrates how the neoteric imperialist project reproduces the discourses of the 'white man's burden' of the colonial era, framed within the 'enlightened' discourse of human rights (ibid.: 6,8):

> For the ideology of empire was hardly ever a brute jingoism; rather, it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends. The image of the European coloniser had to remain an honourable one: he did not come as exploiter, but as enlightener. He was not seeking mere profit, but was fulfilling his duty to his Maker and his sovereign, whilst aiding those less fortunate to rise toward his lofty level. This was the white man's burden.

Discussion of the perceived impacts of FGC on the bodies of women and girls in terms of human rights violations and the consequent duty to intervene conceals the privileging of a particular set of values whilst simultaneously obscuring the oppression that can result as a consequence. The parallels between the logic of the US Secretary of State's intervention into the practices and laws of other nations, in this case on the grounds of 'human rights' (while simultaneously sanctioning violent military incursions in foreign countries that lead to grave violations of the same proclaimed rights) and the prior imposition of European civilisation on the colonies are clear. Just as women's bodies were once appropriated as part of the civilising mission of colonialism, so too are they appropriated in the modern project of globalisation and neo-imperialism (see Fernandez 2010).

The political power of these global discourses is illustrated in the fact that *excision* was outlawed in Senegal in 1999 following the high profile visit of President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton to Tostan (a visit cited by Mrs Clinton in her 2012 remarks). Consideration of the context

in the United States at the time shows that, in 1996, a Togolese woman named Fauziya Kassindja became the first person to be awarded asylum for 'gender-based oppression,' while in the same year the United States passed a federal law against 'female genital mutilation' and began imposing economic sanctions on nations that did not attempt to eliminate the practices among their citizens (Boyle 2002); one can assume that the Senegalese politicians passing the law were not unaware of this policy. 'FGM' was thus used by US leaders as a 'convenient marker with which to place a culture on one side of the dichotomy between the modern and the traditional' (Wade 2009: 296) and yet another excuse for the United States to flex its economic muscle in order to influence policies abroad. Although Tostan's Director has 'humbly recommended' that the US government uphold the Geneva Convention and ratify international human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child in order to 'us[e] human rights as a tool for promoting human dignity and changing harmful social norms' (Population Reference Bureau 2009), by seeking and accepting the financial and political support of US governmental agencies such as the Peace Corps and USAID, as well as the friendship and patronage of political figures such as Hillary Clinton, Tostan's start- and end-point falls within a particular cultural and political perspective. Sylvia Wynter argues that, 'it is only within the terms of our contemporary culture that the eradication of these specific cultural practices, rather than, for example, the eradication of hunger, can be seeable as the indispensable condition of being human, of being […] an autonomous and fully realized woman' (Wynter 1996: 505). As Androus (2009: 36) notes, poverty is the primary underlying condition contributing to early mortality in Africa:

> More children suffer the consequences of being underweight and lacking access to clean water and adequate sanitation than suffer complications from culturally motivated surgeries. If all female genital operations in Africa were to stop today, thousands of children would still die tomorrow from diarrhea brought on by communicable diseases that result from lack of access to sanitation and clean water, conditions which are in turn directly related to poverty.

Of final note is the evolving moderation of the language used to discuss these practices within a human rights framework by individuals such as Hillary Clinton, and as I witnessed during fieldwork, international activists who have come in contact with Melching and Tostan. I suggest that this growing moderation is less an indication of a better understanding of them or an expansion in the terms of the debate, than it is emblematic of the cultural and political changes which have taken place with the rise of globalised multiculturalism (embodied in the 2008 election of the first Black President of the United States) and the appropriation of human rights discourse as a tool of the powerful. As I show elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter 5), one of

Melching's greatest strengths as an advocate for Tostan's activities is her ability to use a politically and culturally appropriate narrative to translate ideas and experiences to a variety of different audiences; even if the fundamental message differs little from more radical feminist activists such as Hosken (1979) and Walker and Parmar (1993). In this regard, it is evident that the language used by Hillary Clinton in 2012 has moderated considerably from the words she used at the Beijing conference (her 1995 emphasis on the presumed pain, brutality and degradation of FGC had disappeared by 2012 to be replaced by a more restrained focus on health and 'quality of life'). This follows her ongoing interaction with Tostan since the late 1990s, although her objective (like Tostan's), that FGC be understood as a 'harmful tradition' to be abandoned, has remained unchanged.

## Genital cutting in global discourse: a cultural double standard?

The narrowness of 'debates' on FGC is further exemplified by the outcry surrounding a policy statement made by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2010 suggesting that doctors be permitted to substitute a request by parents for FGC with an uninvasive clitoral 'nicking' procedure (MacReady 2010). Despite framing this suggestion within an overall condemnation of 'female genital cutting' and putting it forward as an alternative to more invasive forms of cutting, the AAP subsequently rescinded the statement following intense lobbying led by activist groups such as the New York-based Equality Now, claiming that the AAP was 'promoting female genital mutilation' (Equality Now 2010). Tostan's Director explained that she was equally opposed to the idea of 'nicking' as she thought that, 'it's terrible, I think people should just stop' (interview, Dakar, January 2011). Melching stated that while visiting Somaliland she was told by a gynaecologist that although people claimed they were performing *sunnah* (in this case a procedure thought to entail clitoral nicking), they were instead practising infibulation (excision of all or part of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening). She therefore believed that advocating 'nicking' was 'very bad' as it offered a disguise for other, more invasive forms of cutting (ibid.). Understandings such as these of all forms of customary (African) FGC practices as both regressive and oppressive, act as diagnostics of discourse in the Foucauldian sense, as powerful conceptual apparatuses which produce knowledge 'by shap[ing] the thoughts and behaviour of participants by defining the world of permissible assertions (the regime of truth) within which they live and meaningfully interact' (Boddy 2007: 53). Through these discourses, globalised power relations, while seemingly subverted, are firmly maintained. While feminist activists may invoke notions of global sisterhood and equality, they simultaneously normalise

ideas of non-Western people and societies as 'backward' and 'barbaric,' in need of guidance and rescue.

To illustrate, practices such as 'labiaplasty' (an increasingly popular cosmetic procedure among Euro-American women to alter their genitals, that involves cutting) do not fall under the WHO's definition of 'mutilation,' i.e. 'injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons' (WHO 2013), indicating a possible double standard, or at least myopia in this global concern for the well-being and intactness of the female genitalia (see Pedwell 2007; Johnsdotter and Essen 2010). I suggest that this double standard is, in fact, an example of the 'wilful ignorance' or 'desire to ignore' discussed by Nancy Tuana in her paper entitled *The Speculum of Ignorance*, that analyses the different types of knowledge and ignorance at play in the contemporary women's health movement (Tuana 2006: 10, 12). Citing Marilyn Frye's contention that ignorance is an integral component of racism, in that 'those in positions of privilege in such oppressive contexts as racism exhibit a "determined ignorance" of the lives and histories of those deemed inferior,' Tuana argues that 'ignorance is not *passive*, but is the result of many acts and negligences' (2006: 10, emphasis in original). Put simply, such 'wilful ignorance' ('they do not know, and they do not want to know,' ibid.) by Western activists about the existence of analogous female genital alteration practices 'at home,' as well as the parallels easily drawn between FGC and male circumcision, is an example of what Judith Herman calls 'an active social phenomenon of forgetting' (Herman 1992: 9) that reframes all practices undertaken in the West as a result of 'free choice,' conveniently (and actively) ignoring the socio-cultural motivations of all these genital cutting practices.

The WHO—and NGOs such as Tostan—does not consider male circumcision, or the genital surgeries performed on newborn babies deemed 'intersex' (when gender is 'assigned' by physicians at birth, see Shweder et al. 2009) to fall under the category of genital mutilation, even though these also involve the 'partial or total removal of the external […] genitalia, or other injury to the […] genital organs for non-medical reasons' (WHO 2013) (the word 'female' has been omitted from this quotation for illustrative purposes). These types of cutting are also usually performed on minors, without their consent,[25] a major difference being that in the West (especially the United States) both 'intersex' surgery and male circumcision are considered to be

[25] Indeed, Tostan associate Gerry Mackie, writing about FGC, has stressed the 'absence of meaningful consent to the irreversible act' (Mackie 2003: 136) of FGC, a judgment that could equally be applied to male circumcision.

scientifically valid, or even medically necessary procedures. Cliteridectomies are routinely performed to address cases of 'congenital adrenal hyperplasia' on newborns who have been labelled 'intersex babies' in the United States (Navarro 2004). In this case, the genitals of healthy babies are altered in order to 'satisfy our social sexual taxonomy' (Grande 2004: 6).[26]

Indeed, contemporaneous with the push to halt FGC in Africa is a massive campaign to promote male circumcision across the continent (primarily funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), citing health benefits in relation to HIV transmission from women to men (Aizenman 2014; Gates Foundation 2009). As summarised by Darby and Svoboda, 'we now find the WHO conducting two quite separate research projects: one to find evidence for the harm of [female circumcision], another to find evidence for the benefits of [male circumcision]' (Darby and Svoboda 2007: 312).

In fact 'circumcision' of females was itself known in the West until relatively recently, and its history highlights how shifts in cultural attitudes (as opposed to scientific opinion) may lead to the preservation or discontinuation of medical practices (Bell 2005). Clitoridectomies were, for example, occasionally advocated in Europe and the United States until the 1960s as a 'harmless operative procedure' to 'cure' masturbation among females (Sheehan 1981). As Androus (2004: 5) contends, 'the gendered construction of this issue is based on ethnocentric assumptions about the difference between the genital cutting of boys and of girls.' Bell argues that the fact that routine male circumcision was taken up as standard in the United States while FGC was never normalised, is explained by understanding the attitudes toward female and male sexuality that developed in this context over the period, arguing that these attitudes are related to Western constructions of male and female sexuality, wherein the latter is assumed to be 'fragile' and 'passive' ('woman's sexual instincts, being fundamentally more delicate, will be crippled by *any* form of genital surgery,' Bell 2005: 136, emphasis in original), compared to an 'instinctive, active' male sexuality (ibid.: 138). In a similar vein, Susan Bordo contends that within hegemonic Western discourse, when it comes to sex, 'mostly, men's bodies are presented like action-hero toys—wind them up and watch them perform' (1999, cited in Bell 2005: 138).

As J.A. Boon observes, 'foreskins are facts—cultural facts' (Boon 1999: 5). Whereas African FGC practices are perceived in the West as a single homogenous 'cultural' practice, and 'a symbol par excellence of patriarchal oppression' in African societies (Bell 2005: 135), male

[26] See Alice Dreger's paper entitled *Ambiguous Sex—or Ambivalent Medicine?,* exploring the assumptions underlying efforts to 'normalise' intersex individuals, and the ethics of 'treatment' (Dreger 1998).

genital cutting (MGC) procedures that remove the foreskin of non-consenting babies or children (routine neonatal circumcision being most common in the United States, for example), are not considered similarly oppressive or in violation of human rights. As Androus (2009: 37) argues, 'gender-based differential treatment is untenable if the issue is treated as one of human rights.' The 'desire to ignore' (Tuana 2006: 10) the fact that the same ethical dilemmas may apply to practices such as MGC (blind to the similarity of arguments related to hygiene, aesthetics, religion and tradition invoked in support of MGC to those invoked by many practitioners of FGC) reveals the conceptual distance between male and female genital cutting practices inherent to these narratives and the contradictions characterising public policies related to them. In this regard, there is no impetus within Tostan to promote abandonment of the circumcision of male infants or children in the interests of human rights (by far the most prevalent form of genital cutting worldwide, and a standard procedure in Senegal, not only as a Muslim prescription, but as a longstanding cultural norm, see Caldwell et al. 1997); just as there is no such impetus within the institutions that fund and support it (e.g. UNICEF or USAID), dominated as they are by Euro-American cultural and political interests.

Interestingly, the Tostan facilitator training manual for its *Kobi 2* module on health and hygiene, which describes the male and female genitalia for the education of programme participants (p. 71) itself excises all reference to the male foreskin, which does not feature in either the text or image of the male genitals. Given the dominant political orthodoxy described above championing women's rights and bodily integrity, consideration of the likely reaction to such an omission applied to any elements of the female genitalia exemplifies the contradiction inherent within contemporary discourses on genital cutting practices.[27]

Indeed, hegemonic (non)debates on FGC reduce women's sexuality to the body and so-called biological 'facts' about what constitutes a 'normal' body (and consequently 'normal' sexuality). By focusing on the physical form of female genitalia, 'normal' sexuality becomes treated as that given by the body, rather than a product of processes of embodiment, history, culture and context. In this schema, the 'normal' body (be it female or male) is itself a product of scientific 'truths.' In the process, the line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' is produced as 'truth' and naturalised, which happens (at least partly), through the production of scientific 'facts.' With regard to FGC and 'normal' sexuality, Johnsdotter and Essen criticise 'studies that build upon faulty theoretical

[27] Note that the aim of this discussion is neither to advocate for nor condemn either male or female genital cutting practices, but merely to indicate the strong influence of cultural ideas and political ideologies on discourses and policies related to them, including observations about the related role played by 'wilful ignorance' (Tuana 2006: 10) in these scenarios.

assumptions about the role of genitalia in sexuality':

> Possibly, western researchers in this field are captivated by typically western constructions of sexuality, which tend to overemphasize the role of anatomy and physiology in framing and describing sexual activities. In the words of Australian sociologist Juliet Richters: 'as if having sex were a physiological process like digestion rather than a social interaction like having dinner.' (Johnsdotter and Essen 2013: 5-6)

## A 'mission for Africa': situating Tostan's intervention

Tostan's engagement within these complex debates is illustrated in a detailed response given by its Director, Molly Melching, to a question posed during an online discussion hosted on the Population Reference Bureau website on the topic, inquiring:

> Who are today's opponents of ending FGC, both in FGC-practicing ethnic groups, in national institutions in those countries, and abroad (the West)? And how vocal, and how well supported, are they? (Population Reference Bureau 2009)

In response, Melching stated:

> There remains a small but sometimes vocal group of anthropologists who have argued that for the West to be involved in this practice at all is cultural imperialism. Some of these voices are African, some American and other nationalities. Honestly Tostan has not had too much concern with their objections of imperialism or colonialism, since ours is a 99% African organization; since we didn't introduce FGC as a topic—our community members did, on their own; and since the movement for abandonment has been led at the community level, not from the West. Several anthropologists have also gone beyond charges of imperialism to argue that this practice is simply not physically harmful, and that all arguments of harm are constructed by the West. We have not given much credence to this claim, as to us the removal of a body part is harmful, and as this directly contradicts the stories and experiences we heard about from communities in Senegal. All of the arguments I have seen center on hypocrisy between the West and Africa, for example that we demonize FGC in Africa but say nothing when women do something similar in hospitals in the US. To that all I can say is that Tostan's mission is for Africa, and if the day comes that we work with US communities, and if those communities raise this as an issue, we will support them with the same fervency we have supported African communities. Ironically Tostan shares many anthropologist's [sic] concerns about imperialism, which is why our program is so deeply rooted in local traditions and culture—song, dance, poetry, theater, and dialog in local languages are at the heart of our program. We believe that communities have a fundamental right to a leading voice in their development process. Even our work in human rights and responsibilities centers on their application to African culture—far from presenting Human Rights as rules to be followed, we ask participants to debate and discuss them, decide how and if they are applied, and what actions may be appropriate. Perhaps some anthropologist [sic] would prefer that Africa be left alone. We at Tostan however are seeing that change is coming to Africa regardless of whether we are there or not, and thus we would rather be there to be

an advocate for communities in helping them lead their own development. (ibid.)

Analysis of this response illustrates a key feature of Tostan narratives in relation to FGC, that involve repeated attempts to distance the organisation from accusations of cultural imperialism, a feature of critiques of anti-FGC movements (e.g. Morsy's [1991: 19] criticism of the 'Western agenda of rescue missions'). In this regard, Melching dismisses what she calls the 'small but vocal group of anthropologists' who 'remain' (the implicit implication being that they have not yet caught up with or been converted to the mission of abandonment). Perhaps tacitly referring to her own background as an American (and thus representative of 'the West'), Melching states that Tostan is a '99% African' organisation, presumably invoking the statistic that 99% of Tostan's staff are African (failing to mention, whoever that its key decision makers are not, however, African, as explored in Chapter 7 of this thesis.)

Stating that, 'we didn't introduce FGC as a topic,' Melching presumably refers to the story of Malicounda Bambara (when women Tostan participants decided to stop practising FGC after exposure to the Tostan programme), thereby reinforcing the contemporary organisational narrative of 'grassroots' participation and partnership. (Somewhat in contradiction to this image of spontaneous, community-led decision-making, however, is Tostan's programmatic attempt to replicate the Malicounda Bambara event across a much broader national and cultural landscape, which has led it to incorporate FGC abandonment—and its symbol of success, the 'Public Declaration'—into its formal curriculum. As a result, Tostan now markets its intervention as specifically promoting FGC abandonment to donors and other members of the 'interpretive communities' it wishes to enrol).

Melching's statement that, for Tostan, 'the removal of a body part is harmful' would appear to indicate a measure of the 'wilful ignorance' or 'desire to ignore' (Tuana 2006: 10, 12) discussed in the debates above, or at least, a culturally induced myopia regarding the similar ethical issues surrounding practices such as male genital cutting, that also involve 'the removal of a body part.' Furthermore, the argument that, 'Tostan's mission is for Africa,' offers the idea of such a 'mission' as a simple, uninterrogated truth. As Stirrat argues, 'motivation' is what marks out what he refers to as 'missionaries' within the development business: they are 'motivated by a sense of duty and obligation' (Stirrat 2008: 412). The decision to work in Africa is not an apolitical one, and just as the Christian missionary endeavour was key to the colonial-era imperial project, the neo-missionary motivations discerned in the depiction above carry the power to set the agenda,

determining who should be 'helped' and how. These colonial continuities, or 'parallels with the past' (Stirrat 2008: 416) are not only invoked in the language of the 'mission,' but in the very belief in the right and ability of one to convert others to one's way of thinking. As Stirrat (2008: 417) argues in this regard:

> If successful, conversion is internalized and external forms of discipline become unnecessary. This process is usually presented in terms of 'empowerment' and 'liberation'; of freeing people from the shackles that bind them. Ultimately what is involved in this process is the remaking and reconstitution of local practices in line with the values of the missionaries.

Strongly related to this idea of 'conversion,' is, I argue, the invocation of human rights within Melching's narrative. The rights discourse conveyed here within a depiction of Africa as a battleground between outsiders over the right to define the interests of Africans, brings to mind Laura Nader's discussion about the 'double-edged story' of human rights and moral imperialism (Nader 2006). Nader challenges the credibility of contemporary human rights discourses in the West by analysing the 'normative blindness' accompanying much of Western dealings with the rights of women, in which the promotion of human rights is used as a justification for pre-emptive war (e.g. NATO-led military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan) (Nader 2006: 6). She contends that, 'the credibility of a human rights spirit requires that we look at ourselves as well as those others whose plight moves us to reach out while ironically also ensuring that we are blinded' (ibid.).

To conclude, I argue that, in contrast to organisational narratives that emphasise its 'movement to abandon FGC' (Tostan 2013b) as a locally-inspired campaign, the NGO's ideology is firmly embedded within, and at least partially derived from the Western-influenced political and cultural framework described in this chapter. Tostan's objectives harmonise with Western feminism-inspired discourses and policies that condemn as harmful all forms of customary genital cutting in Africa when conducted on females. As such, opposing the customary genital cutting of women and girls is no longer a radical position for an international NGO to take, and in fact any consideration of an approach other than total abandonment is now unacceptable at the global level, as is evident from the AAP policy statement controversy. As Lauren Leve (2001) highlights, focus on women and girls in development is now a development dogma (even given the 'paradoxes' that may arise from this focus, see Kea 2007), and NGOs such as Tostan seeking funding from international and bilateral donors do not fail to take account of this. As Mahmood (2005) notes, the normative subject of feminism remains a liberatory one, and in this respect, Tostan differentiates itself within the assortment of stances converging on the topic largely on the

basis of its 'respectful approach to local beliefs and culture' (Tostan 2014b), and an avoidance of condemnatory language such as 'mutilation' or 'torture.' Furthermore, the explicit assumption is that a 'mission for Africa' exists, and that Tostan has the right to fulfil it. The following chapter offers an ethnographic exploration of the implementation of this 'mission,' focusing on the practice of FGC in Casamance among people who have been '*sensibilisés*' ('sensitised') by the Tostan project.

# Chapter 4

## Answering the Call? Tostan and Perspectives on *Excision* in Casamance

### Introduction

As explored in the previous chapter, FGC has been a topic of debate for global activists, academics, political representatives and other interested parties for several decades. These debates have largely ignored the widely differing physical forms and practices related to FGC customs as well as the diverse social and ritual contexts within which they are meaningful. In contrast, a number of anthropologists working in the Senegambia sub-region to which I turn here have shed light on the 'myriad of issues and cultural dimensions of women's initiation rituals' (Ahmadu 2005: 130), elucidating different areas of meaning within the rituals and the gender constructs that relate to them (e.g. Skramstad 1990; Johnson 2000; Hernlund 2003; Dellenborg 2007). This chapter builds on this scholarship by exploring the present-day practice and understanding of the *ñakay,* a female initiation ritual, in a Casamance village that has supposedly renounced *excision* following the Tostan education programme. The analytical focus equally turns to Tostan's institutional approach to local perspectives and understandings of female sexuality and reproduction, an approach that, I argue, reflects the employment of 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2012a). Drawing on Dilley and Kirsch's understanding of ignorance as 'being part of a regime, that is, a constellation of discursive practices and power relations giving rise to epistemological gaps and forms of un-knowing that have generative social effects and consequences' (Dilley and Kirsch, in press), I analyse how knowledge and ignorance are reproduced, often strategically, by a variety of actors in this milieu.

I begin by contextualising and detailing the contemporary practice of the *ñakay* in Casamance*,* a female initiation and knowledge transfer rite that requires participants to undergo excision of the tip of the clitoris as part of a number of other important ritual activities. I explore the way in which this ritual now occurs in the village region where I undertook fieldwork in 2009, among a community that has received large exposure from Tostan to human rights and health information

about the need to abandon FGC. I investigate the knowledge that local actors now express in relation to *excision* and the form it takes, including their expressed understandings of its detrimental impacts on women's fertility. In examining the production and screening in Casamance by Tostan of a film entitled *The Call of Diégoune,* I analyse Tostan's decision to ignore locals' willingness to discuss issues of sexual pleasure in relation to *excision*, and explore why the NGO instead chose to employ the more contextually taboo issue of childbirth in the film. I also discuss my own 'ignorance' on the subject in this context as an outsider whom community members wish to convince that they have abandoned practising FGC.

## *Excision* in Kalounaye: gender construction and the transfer of knowledge

A significant impact of the Mandinka and Islamic influences on society in Kalounaye was the introduction of *excision* in the mid-20th century among Jola women, as the first phase in a two-stage initiation ritual for girls. Genital cutting among girls, or *sunay* as it is usually referred to in the vernacular,[28] is performed discreetly (by an *aŋamaan*, the high status female cutter)[29] on a group of girls as the first phase in the initiation process, followed (months, or even years) later by an elaborate coming-of-age ceremony (the *ñakay*). The *sunay* is now usually performed on young girls (I was told from about 3 to 6 years old), and involves seven days of seclusion and healing afterward at home (a liminal period during which girls are considered highly vulnerable to evil spirits), the end of which is marked by a special bathing ritual. As elsewhere in Senegal, the cutting procedure in Casamance is exclusively the domain of women, and just as a mother is usually not aware that her son is to be circumcised, likewise a father rarely knows of arrangements for his daughter's *sunay*.

In contrast to the narrative underpinning globalised debates (that reduces FGC practices to a manifestation of patriarchal oppression and violence), in the case of the Jola, young women were themselves the leading actors in the adoption of the *excision* ritual, using the Mandinka population as a reference group (Hamer 1983; Dellenborg 2007). Elder men and women were resistant to the introduction of the rite, viewing it as a fundamental violation of male and female ritual complementarity (ibid.). Ethnographer Liselott Dellenborg contends that prior to this, the

[28]*Sunay* is derived from the Arabic term *sunnah*, referring to the practices and habits of the Prophet Mohammad (Dellenborg 2007).

[29]In parallel with the male *bukut* ceremony, the *aŋamaan,* like the ritual circumciser of boys, ideally comes from a blacksmith family (Dellenborg 2007: 115).

experience for men of circumcision and for women of childbirth (the most important acts for the creation of male and female gender identity) were considered complementary and distinct (Dellenborg 2007). Odile Journet's research on the Jola suggested that both of these events be understood in terms of blood letting or sacrifice: men bleed under a knife during the rite of circumcision, and women bleed during childbirth, with a woman's first pregnancy considered similar to an initiation, as the parturient woman's courage was likened to that of a warrior (Journet 1979). Dellenborg (2007) argues that the introduction of FGC therefore violated Jola gender cosmology, leading to resistance to its introduction on the part of older generations. In contemporary Muslim Jola societies, marriage, parenting *and* circumcision/*excision* are now requisites for both men and women, in contrast to the 'traditional' gender order under which genital cutting was a male privilege only. Conversion to Islam, and Mandinka cultural influences in the form of *sunay* and *ñakay* (knowledge transfer) initiation rituals, in fact provided 'new emancipatory possibilities for young women,' providing them with both a 'legitimate religious identity and an initiation association that furnishes important networks, facilitates female mobility and allows women a space for agency' (Dellenborg 2007: 36). During the years of conversion, Mandinka religious leaders were unanimous in asserting that *excision* was a Muslim custom, equal to male circumcision, and a means of purification (ibid.).

Dellenborg (2007) argues that in contemporary Jola Muslim society, the *sunay* and *ñakay* are now critical to the construction of female identity. Among the Jola (as across all groups in Senegal regardless of ethnic background or religious affiliation), males are under the same imperative to be circumcised. In the case of the Jola, if a man has not undergone the male initiation rite of *bukut* (which includes circumcision, seclusion in the 'sacred forest' and the transmission of 'secret' knowledge, see Flannery 2001),[30] then he is not considered to be truly a man, and he will be addressed by the term *ambaj*, or non-initiate (De Jong 2002).

The parallel initiation ceremony for girls, the *ñakay*, serves the same function: the passing on of important esoteric, religious and social knowledge, which may only take place after completion of the ritual excision ceremony (*sunay*). As I witnessed in Kalounaye, the *ñakay*, the second of

[30] Former US Peace Corps volunteer Amy Flannery's ethnographic film *Return to Belaye*, documenting her return to Casamance from the United States with her Jola husband as he was about to undergo the *bukut*, highlights the secrecy surrounding the ritual. She begins her story with the statement that, 'some secrets can never be shared, like what your husband learned in the Sacred Forest. You can read books, make assumptions, and try to imagine things, but you can never get confirmation. Asking too many questions is considered impolite. Some things are simply *"nini"*. That means forbidden in Jola.' (Flannery 2001)

the two stages, may include girls of ages ranging from around 4 to 20 years old (or older); the only precondition of their entry to the ceremony being that they have undergone the *sunay* ritual cutting, which may have taken place many months or years before. The age of the girls themselves is not the indicator of their maturity, instead they reach adulthood once they have completed the *ñakay*, meaning that in effect a 6-year-old is considered as much an 'adult' as a 16-year-old. As I describe in detail below, attending a *ñakay* in May 2009 in the Kalounaye area, I observed white-robed girls with their heads modestly covered, in solemn procession through the village on their way to the forest for a three-week period of seclusion. There were as many pre-pubescent as post-pubescent girls present, yet all were considered equals in maturity within their cohort as they had undergone the excision procedure (*sunay*) and were therefore ready to receive the knowledge to be imparted during the *ñakay*.

For the Jola, control of sexuality in subordination to men is not generally perceived as the main reason to excise women. For the people I spoke to in Kalounaye, *excision* was viewed as a prescription of Islam and an integral part of girls' initiation into adulthood. However, as I show below in analysis of the screening of a Tostan film in Casamance about *excision*, the matter of sexuality was a topic of debate, and I came across various ideas about its impacts on women's sexuality from both men and women (opinions which were usually expressed vaguely, in a joking fashion).

The recent adoption of the phenomenon among the Jola, who had hitherto not practised FGC, is not typical in the African context, with most groups that practise FGC having done so for centuries (Abu-Sahlieh 1994). For the 'Mandingised' Jola (especially the Fonyi Jola), the *ñakay* ritual over time became a very important process for the transfer of key knowledge and the peer socialisation of girls.[31] In Kalounaye, an unexcised woman, irrespective of how many children she has borne, is considered to 'know nothing' (in Jola, '*amanjut waaf*'), and is teased with the name '*soliima*' (a word of Mandinka origin with strongly judgemental contentions of ignorance, rudeness, impurity and immaturity, see Dellenborg 2007). The term *soliima* is applied equally to men and women who are thought to be ignorant of the teachings of Islam. Dellenborg argues that with the decline in the importance of indigenous religion that accompanied Jola conversion to Islam and attendant dramatic social changes of the 20th century, women were forced to find new

[31] This is not the case among other groups in Lower Casamance. Indeed *excision* is actually forbidden (*neyney*) by the Jola Kasa and Buluf groups, who have founded *awasen* shrines against the practice (Dellenborg 2007).

strategies for ritual and religious authority:

> Circumcision [was] a way for women, as well as men, to become religious persons within the Mandinka form of Islam, and the 'new' form of female secret society associated with Islam, may have opened up empowering possibilities for young women and childless married women […] whereas only those women who have given birth to a child have the right to be initiated into the indigenous form of female secret societies, the prerequisite for initiation into the 'new,' 'Muslim' form of initiation is excision. (Dellenborg 2004: 84)

However, whereas the introduction of the *excision* ritual had originally presented Jola women with an important source of empowerment and religious expression, as I show in the following sections, in Kalounaye the *ñakay,* although still considered an important event by girls and their communities, is now spoken of quite differently, although it continues to take place. The genital cutting element (*sunay*), always shrouded in secrecy, has now become the subject of contradictory statements, due in large part to the impact of anti-FGC and girls' education campaigns such as Tostan's, coupled with locals' awareness of the law prohibiting it.

## *Ñakay* in Kalounaye, May 2009

One afternoon in mid-May after returning to the village of Elounou from a day trip to Ziguinchor, I was lounging after lunch under the mango tree with Sokhna (the 17 year-old niece of my host mother, Bintou), who was around seven months' pregnant at the time. Sokhna and I had become quite close, as we spent a lot of time together around the compound occupied with daily chores, while chatting and joking. That day, Sokhna told me with a giggle that she had learned something that would interest me. The day before, while I had been away in Ziguinchor, she had been hanging clothes out to dry when she heard the sound of vigorous drumbeats and banging coming from the yard over the wall. Not knowing the neighbours, or indeed anyone in the village (being an outsider who preferred to speak Mandinka, and an unmarried pregnant outsider at that, Sokhna tended to stay in the compound most of the time, only venturing out to draw water in the mornings), she had asked Bintou what the noise was about. They are probably doing the *sunay*, replied Bintou. Sokhna reported this with some glee to me (she and I had spoken several times about *excision* in the village and Bintou's insistence that it was no longer practised there). The

banging noises were to conceal the screams of the girls, Sokhna said.[32]

Although curious, I was reluctant to bring up this story with Bintou. As the wife of the local district nurse, and a women's leader, she had been an enthusiastic participant and head of the Community Management Committee set up under the Tostan programme, and constantly reiterated to me that, '*on a laissé cela*' ('we have stopped doing that,' i.e. *excision*). I presumed that Bintou would deny knowledge of it, and I did not want to put her (or myself) in an awkward position. However, the incident with the drumming caused me pause for thought. It seemed likely to me that families in the village were continuing to excise their daughters, particularly the Mandinka families such as those in the house adjacent, who had certainly been practising the *sunay* for generations. It also made sense to me that Bintou would deny that *excision* was continuing in the village, all the while knowing that it still happened, and while perhaps being personally opposed to it (Bintou had told me that she herself had been excised by her grandmother, and that she felt it was an unnecessary tradition. If she'd had daughters, she told me, she would never have permitted them to be excised.) As a local leader and public advocate of the programme Bintou was, in a way, a 'translator' for Tostan's message, and as such was in a delicate position, negotiating various knowledges and beliefs, while at the same time, striving to improve her own lot and that of her family. Sally Engle Merry argues that human rights translators such as Bintou, by holding a 'double consciousness,' may be 'caught in the middle,' juxtaposing transnational human rights values and local epistemologies. Merry contends that:

> There are clear parallels with the translation of human rights ideas from a transnational metacode of human rights law to local situations. Local leaders are often eager to appear compliant with human rights expectations while continuing to act in noncompliant ways [...] human rights translators, like development consultants, are often caught in the middle. (Merry 2006: 42)

Speaking directly about matters such as this with Bintou usually turned out to be rather frustrating, as I got the impression I was being given a version of events that my interlocutor believed I wanted or expected to hear. However, a few weeks after my exchange with Sokhna, I was pleasantly surprised one evening when Bintou suggested I accompany her the next day to attend a *ñakay* in the village of Gandaay.[33] It was an important initiation ceremony, she told me,

[32] Dellenborg (2007: 119), writing about the *sunay* in Kalounaye, describes how 'to drown any cries from the girls the women used upturned bowls as percussion instruments' during the performance of the cutting operation.

[33] Name of village has has been changed.

in advance of the rains to come within the following weeks. I had already heard of a very large *bukut* that had taken place earlier in the month around 40km away, which had seen a big delegation from Elounou in attendance.

The next morning we rose at dawn to begin our trip to the village, around 12km away on a dirt road. I was transported on the back of a neighbour's moped, while Bintou travelled in a slower *ndiaga ndiaye* bus. Arriving in Gandaay around 8am, the village streets were completely empty, save for a troupe of young men and boys prancing through them. No women were in sight at all, amid the shrill screech of the boys' whistles and the rumble of transistor radios. The young men frolicking through the village were all dressed in a most interesting fashion: some were draped in green, yellow and red robes, with beads around their necks and whistles in their mouths (which they blew vigorously at random intervals). Others were wearing women's *pagnes* (wraparound skirts), dresses and wigs, with sunglasses perched on their noses and broad grins adorning their faces.

I soon caught up with Bintou, and we proceeded to the house of her friend, Oumy, where I was introduced to a flurry of women, all in buoyant mood. As the morning progressed, the momentum was building in the village and the air tingled with excitement as the screeching whistling sounds increased, augmented by drumbeats and the chatter of busloads of arriving visitors. Bintou and I moved around the village (a large one, considerably bigger than Elounou with its 1,000-strong population) visiting numerous compounds and at one point stopping at a house where I observed three solemn-faced young initiates being prepared for the ceremony. The girls, around 8 or 9 years of age, were freshly bathed and each was being swathed by a woman in two strips of fresh white cotton, carefully covering every part of their bodies except their faces, which were all marked by serious expressions. The reserve of the initiates was in stark contrast to the mounting excitement outdoors. Immense preparations had clearly been made for this event, for months in advance. Bintou told me that the *ñakay* was usually only held a few times within a person's lifetime in each village, and so it was a great thrill to host it, although, she said, it was very expensive as so many visitors had to be hosted. Family and friends came from across the country bearing gifts, but gifts must be given in return.

As the day wore on and the excitement continued to grow, Bintou and I were swept into a great parade of hundreds, who proceeded to cavort their way through the streets of the village. Just as the men wore women's clothes, many of the women, even the older ones, were wearing jeans and

baggy t-shirts, their faces cloaked in white paint, with strings of colourful beads criss-crossing their chests, beaded calabashes on their heads and whistles in their mouths. Many brandished sticks fashioned to look like shotguns, with some waving long-handled knives or ornamental bows. I saw some very unexpected costumes, including one young man adorned in a Star Wars Darth Vadar mask. Other young men wore surgical masks on their faces, paired with skirts made of colourful rice sacks, while one or two women had found cowboy hats and perched them on top of their heads, brandishing their wooden 'guns.' A plastic child's doll, white faced and rosy cheeked, and clad in identical robes to the initiates, was waved around by someone over the crowd. Fluttering red, yellow and green national flags poked out here and there over the heads of the crowded people and the general atmosphere was of carnival. I expected to see almost anything among this joyous and eclectic throng of people, in an atmosphere fuelled with intense anticipation.

Swept along with the crowd, we arrived at a large compound where Bintou told me the initiates were 'hidden, to protect them from evil'; in advance of their initiation they were very vulnerable to bad spirits. After some time, a procession of white-clad girls emerged, moving slowly in single file with heads bowed, each clutching the robes of the girl ahead of her. Their ages varied greatly, with the youngest appearing to be around 4 or 5 years old while the older girls were at least in their mid to late teens. The crowd danced around them as they made their way through the streets of the village, clouds of red dust enveloping the proceedings. We are going to the '*bois sacré*' ('sacred forest'), Bintou explained.

On arrival at the grove, the crowd began to heave forward, becoming more tightly packed than ever as the initiates moved out of sight. Bintou and I lost each other in the swell on a few occasions, and at one point I found myself at one edge of the forest, as the crowd began to disperse following the disappearance of the initiates. I faced a daunting row of women, all clad in the same patterned outfit with matching headdresses and beads criss-crossing their chests. They were holding stout wooden sticks and tall bow-like weapons, and all bore ominous expressions. At this point, Bintou spotted me, and snatching me protectively by the hand she led me away saying, '*tu ne peux pas entrer, seule* [sic] *les femmes circoncisées peuvent entrer'* ('you can't enter, only circumcised women can enter').[34] We made our way back to the village as the crowd

[34] On reflection, I interpret Bintou's protective gesture towards me when she ushered me away quickly from the women guarding the forest as making sense in a context where, according to Dellenborg (2007: 198) 'if an unexcised woman should […] enter the initiation grove uninvited, she would be excised by force.'

began to splinter off, and after some more house visits, we journeyed home to Elounou, exhausted after this day of excitement.

### Local perspectives on *excision*

I took the opportunity the next day to discuss this experience with Sokhna. As a Mandinka, she herself had undergone a very similar ritual as a child in her home village in the Sédhiou region. Her memories of the event were positive:

> There was a big festival. My friends and I, we were in the middle of it all, and we were very excited. It was hard in the forest sometimes, the women beat us and we only ate rice, and we had to crawl on the ground. But we learned about women's things, you know, things men should not know. And when we came out again there was a huge celebration with lots of people and we were given gifts and money. It's very good. If my baby is a girl, she will do this. (Fieldnotes 06/05/2009)

She also recalled the *sunay*, but spoke little of it, hardly seeming to remember it: 'it hurt, but it was over then. It's a good thing, we all did it together.' Sokhna reiterated that she would have this done to her daughter, although at one point she looked at me worriedly and wondered if she would be sent to prison as she knew, '*c'est interdit'* ('it's forbidden'). I was somewhat surprised to learn afterwards that Sokhna's village had itself undergone the Tostan programme (2004 to 2006), as Sokhna seemed to know little about either the law or the reportedly harmful consequences of *excision*; evidently she herself had not been reached by the programme. (I learned of Tostan's presence in her village—she herself had never heard of the NGO before she came to Elounou—at the Tostan 'Departmental Declaration Against Excision and Child/Forced Marriage' described in Chapter 1, documents for which listed all participant villages in the region).

Sokhna also recalled that only excised women could enter the initiation grove. Hearing this again, I concluded that the group of girls at the *ñakay* I had just attended (many of whom were from the village of Elounou) must logically have all been excised. This was despite Bintou's assurances that it was no longer practised in the village. However, after several months living there I had become quite used to the contradiction between what was said and what was often happening before my very eyes. As with many other occurrences in Elounou, I found that villagers had learned to say the 'correct' thing, doubtless in the wake of so many development interventions, while often continuing to do things as they saw fit (for example, in class, I heard women cheerfully repeat simplified versions of the Kobi lessons on hygiene, including advice on how to

dispose of rubbish in an organised manner, while still continuing to toss their rubbish on the streets of the village).

One of the primary iterations that I came across among village women who had undergone Tostan's programme was that *excision* was '*mauvais*' ('bad' or 'wrong') because of its negative impacts on fertility. Bintou informed me that:

> If she [a woman] is circumcised,[35] she can't have children. Or she can have one, that's it. Or maybe two, that's it. All that is because of circumcision. They said that because they noticed that women now don't have many children. One, two, one, sometimes three, two, one. It's true, they have spoken the truth. ('They' presumably referring to Tostan; Fieldnotes 15/05/09).

Bintou explained the phenomenon by stating that in contrast to male circumcision, the bleeding accompanying *excision* cannot be stopped due to physiological differences between men and women, and can lead to death:

> If you cut the lips… it will bleed, a lot. You can't stop it. But if it's a man, if it bleeds, if you attach here, it stops. But the woman, if it bleeds, you can't stop it. Because you don't have that which you need so that the blood doesn't flow. (Fieldnotes 20/06/09)

Although this statement appeared inconsistent with the situation of most of the married women Bintou had introduced me to in the village, who had borne more than one or two children (the average was around five per woman, by my observations), I did not attempt to contradict her.

Telling me these things, Bintou spoke very vaguely about both the detail of the cutting procedure and the female anatomy, but instead spoke (as she did about other '*informations*' she had received from Tostan) as a student who remembers fragments of terminology memorised from a lesson. Indeed, the villagers had already received '*sensibilisation*' (awareness-raising) on the issue from a number of sources, she said, stating that there had been a programme against FGC (run by 'the Swiss') before Tostan. Another NGO, Africare, had also touched on *excision* (Bintou had once again been a volunteer to '*sensibiliser*' people about the topic), and a nurse from Ziguinchor had also come to discuss the matter during my stay at the village.

[35] Like Dellenborg (2007), I found it occasionally confusing that in Casamance, when speaking in French, people often referred to both male and female initiation rites as 'circumcision' ('*circumcision*'); this use of a single term offering further evidence of the equivalence of the practices in the minds of the speakers. Distinct terms were used when speaking in Jola *(bukut; sunay/ñakay*), with the French *excision* also used.

As I detail below, another event, the screening of a film produced by Tostan on the topic, brought the matter to the fore in the villagers' lives during the period of my fieldwork.

### *'The Call of Diégoune'*

During the summer of 2009, Tostan ran a special project in the Casamance region. A pair of Belgian filmmakers affiliated with an NGO working with Tostan France had shot a 30-minute 'awareness-raising' film the previous summer in the village of Diégoune, on the theme of abandonment of FGC. The initial target audience of the film were Casamance villagers themselves, and thus the film had been shot entirely in the Jola language (Fonyi dialect). The aim was to contribute to Tostan's broader campaign against FGC in the region. Once the film was ready for screening, a small group of Tostan staff were to travel around the region in the summer of 2009 and show the film, and undertake an evaluation thereof in 80 villages, some of which had received the Tostan programme and some of which had not. The project was well-organised and well-equipped. The team projecting the film included a technical staff member responsible for setting up the equipment (which included a large screen, speakers, and an electrical generator) in each village; a driver; two evaluators/translators; and a French intern, who was leading the assignment. One of the aims of screening the film was to assess viewers' reactions to the information conveyed about FGC, to find out how they felt about this and what they had learned, if anything.

In March 2009, as I was in Dakar preparing to travel south to begin research in Casamance, the Tostan France Coordinator asked me to undertake a 'mission' in Ziguinchor related to the project. The film, known provisionally in French as *l'Appel de Diégoune* (*The Call of Diégoune*) was undergoing editing and translation at the time and those working on the project wanted input for this process from the regional Tostan staff. I was given an early cut of the film on DVD and asked to show it at the regional office in Ziguinchor to all the staff members, both office and field staff (i.e. the facilitators and supervisors), some of whom had been involved in making the film in 2008, although none of them had yet seen it. I was tasked with noting their reactions to the film, getting their feedback, and working with an office staff member to get a preliminary translation of the film from Jola into French and English.

The day after my arrival in Ziguinchor, the local staff (around twenty people, most of whom were men) assembled in the dusty meeting room and crowded around my laptop computer to watch the

film. As they watched the film, I could see from their expressions that the viewers were captivated and moved by it, and their first reaction was, 'show it again!' We ended up watching the film three times together. (This was also helpful to me as I had a minimal grasp of the Jola language at the time and was glad to get intermittent translations from those around me as we watched; it also meant that I was able to closely observe the audience's reactions, which in fact seemed more revealing when I did not at first fully understand what they were watching.)

The group was clearly fascinated to see a very beautiful, professionally shot film of their own local area, featuring villagers that they knew, all speaking in the Jola Fonyi dialect, something they had never seen before. In fact, two of those present appeared in the film themselves: a young female facilitator named Rama, and one of the male supervisors, Mademba. Watching the film, it was clear that Mademba was quite proud to see himself on screen, as he nudged and grinned at his neighbours when his part began. This appearance saw him fixing his motorbike and discussing the fact that his wife was excised; he stated that he would prefer if she were not. On the other hand, Rama looked considerably more uncomfortable and merely watched the film quietly with a rather embarrassed expression on her face. Hers was one of a number of different reactions the staff had to the film. Some in the group seemed to feel uncomfortable during a segment featuring the Diégoune ICP (public health nurse), a spectacled middle-aged man who spoke very forcefully and graphically about the harmful medical effects of *excision*.

After watching the film several times and working on translating the transcript, I finally came to understand Rama's discomfort and embarrassment, as she discussed the impacts of *excision* on her life, and on her sexual desire in particular. Her segment began with a shot of her in Diégoune, speaking in voiceover as she proceeded to walk through the village (my translation):

> My name is Rama Ehemba. I am the Tostan facilitator at Diégoune, a village that has made a public declaration to stop practising excision.
> I'm not married. I don't have any children. The fact of not having any children… I think there is something missing in a woman like me… I don't think of being with a man. What was taken from me is something necessary to the person, because it is God Himself who gave it to us. We need this, in order to be healthy. If this thing is taken from us, we are injured. They say that it, the excision, is an education, but is it really an education? It's not an education. It is simply a practice that injures women. I ask you, a practice like this, which hurts women…? Is it a good thing? Is it a positive thing? Help me, I ask of you.

Rama said that she '[didn't] think of being with a man' (i.e. she lacked sexual desire for a man),

leading to her unenviable position as an unmarried and childless woman,[36] a point on which I was slow to pick up on while first watching the film. I initially assumed that it was my own lack of understanding of the Jola language that had made it hard for me to pick up on this point, that is, that Rama lacked sexual desire as a result of being excised. However, at a later screening of the film in my host village, I observed from the conversation and reaction of spectators that many of them, too, did not seem to pick up on this message because it had been transmitted too subtly. Indeed, the Tostan Ziguinchor Coordinator told me afterwards that it was important not to mention the sexual pleasure issues related to *excision* too explicitly as this was a major taboo in Senegal.

However, in discussion later with Chloe, the intern working on the project, I learned that the filmmakers in fact possessed a large amount of footage of interviews with Diégoune women who spoke openly about the issue of sexual pleasure, but that it had been decided by the Tostan management to omit this as they felt it was too taboo to mention and might alienate or anger the audience. This had surprised her, Chloe said, as she had noticed that people in the villages where the film was shown seemed keen to discuss this aspect of the practice, and the omission seemed at odds with the idea of community dialogue for problem-solving that is the stated cornerstone of Tostan's approach. Instead, Tostan management had decided that the main focus of the film should be on the health consequences of *excision*. As a result, the focus of the negative consequences of *excision* ended up being mainly on its impact on childbearing, as the subsequent testimony of another local woman in the film, standing in a rice field, illustrates:

> My name is Diaretou Diemé. I will tell you about my problems. I wanted to have many children. But because of the problems I faced due to my excision, I have only had two children. I dream of having many children, five or ten. But because of my *excision*, I could only have two children. If we have decided to give up practising *excision*, it's because we have experienced so many problems because of it. Because, when we are excised, we have terrible problems when we give birth. I wanted to have five children, a dream that I can no longer realise, because of my excision.

Diaretou's story was then consolidated by the testimony of the Diégoune ICP (public health nurse), a spectacled, white-coated, middle-aged man. He described in detail (accompanied by explicit gestures) his experience of assisting excised women in giving birth, as follows:

[36] Dellenborg (2007: 106) contends among Jola women, 'to be childless is considered the worst situation a woman can find herself in.'

> When I receive a girl who is about to give birth for the first time, I call her mother, so that she can attend the delivery of her daughter's baby. I call her, because I want her to see the effects of *excision* on her daughter. I want her to see what the *excision* has caused. In a non-excised woman, the opening is large enough to deliver a baby, but in a woman who is excised, the opening is too narrow. When the opening is too small, the baby can die, and the mother can die. In order for the child to be delivered, the woman may tear. I have to cut her, and then I can sew up her wound, but it is not good for the mother that I have to do this. That's why we have to pay such attention to girls giving birth for the first time. I'm not saying that an excised woman cannot bring a child into the world, she certainly can. But in any event, her genitals are ruined, she is damaged, until her menopause.

Speaking earnestly about 'the opening,' the ICP illustrated the problems women encountered in childbirth by gesturing with his hands, forming a circle with his right thumb and forefinger and pushing the fingers of his left hand against it. He then formed a circle with both of his hands as he described how 'the woman may tear' and he would have to 'cut her and sew up the wound.'

This part of the film was by far the most controversial and disturbing for both of the audiences with which I watched this film. There was much debate among the staff at the Ziguinchor office about the ICP's presentation. Some approved of what he had said, thinking it was very realistic, and that it was good to explain the health consequences of *excision*. However, other staff members (and many of the people in Elounou who subsequently viewed the film), were clearly shocked by what the ICP said, with some of them gasping at the gestures he made, although they did not openly explain their shock. Nonetheless it was ultimately decided by the Tostan project managers in Paris and Dakar to leave this part as it was in the film.

As I had discovered that day in Ziguinchor, and later on while watching the film in the village, the major taboo in the film did not appear to be the issue of (women's) sexual pleasure, but the open discussion of childbirth and the description of the physical form of women's genitals (a finding underscored in Mariette van Tilburg's [1998] reflexive essay on her research as a pregnant ethnographer among the Jola). As one of the young male school teachers, Cherif, explained to me after viewing the film in Elounou:

> He [the ICP] spoke well, but the way he said it… our friends say that he unveiled how they [women] do it [give birth]… it's as if he pulled the *pagne* [skirt] from a woman and made her naked in front of the public. That's why the women are not happy with what he said. Even I was embarrassed, I lowered my head, because I was ashamed to hear this in front of our mothers. We don't have the habit of talking of these things in front of our parents. (Fieldnotes 28/06/09)

The problem lay in the fact that the ICP had touched on two 'taboos': firstly, through his gestures, he had illustrated the shape of the female genitals, and secondly, he had revealed the secret of childbirth. 'Men and children should not know about this,' an elderly woman named Coumba Diedhiou said to my host mother, Bintou, in our compound the next day, shaking her head:

> They should not know how a baby comes from the belly of his mother. We were very ashamed to hear him say this in front of our children, our husbands! If it were not a secret, women would go to give birth in the street! I cannot sleep because of this… we know very well how women give birth but here in Africa it is taboo to speak of it. (Fieldnotes 28/06/09)

Furthermore, the related issue of blood loss caused a stir among many viewers. Just after the ICP's appearance, the film returned to Diaretou Diemé, standing knee-high in the waters of her rice-field, where she says:

> After my last delivery, the doctor said to me I must not have any more children, because I was at risk of terrible haemorrhaging during birth. I, who am excised, I always had difficulties at childbirth, I lost so much blood.

This statement also caused shock among viewers as it revealed that women lose blood during childbirth, in the process divulging another of women's 'secrets.' As discussed above, Journet (1979) suggests that for the Jola, the importance of male circumcision and childbirth (both 'secret' events) lay in the relation between bloodletting and sacrifice, with the courage of a woman during childbirth likened to that of a warrior. Didier Fassin (1987) writes that Jola women's social power is strongly linked to their fertility, which in turn relates to the secrecy around childbirth, and explains women's anger about the matter being discussed in public. As my host 'sister' Sokhna explained to me afterwards when discussing the public reaction:

> When the woman said that she lost a lot of blood during the birth… among us, since I was born, I have never heard it spoken of like this in front of everyone, the blood, and how a woman gives birth. People do not want to hear that. It is women's business, something sacred. It's not good for us to talk of that in front of the men. (Fieldnotes 29/06/09)

Although these segments did not lead those I spoke with to reject the film as a whole—it was generally received with great enthusiasm and positivity—it was clear that the controversy was much greater around childbirth, blood loss, and the physical form of the female genitals, than Rama's discussion of the impact of *excision* on her sexual desire. Indeed, during my fieldwork I did not come across a real 'taboo' surrounding the question of sexual desire, either male or

female (indeed, sex was often a topic of joking among villagers, when the subject of *excision* did arise in response to events such as these). Furthermore, the decision by the film editing team to omit more frank discussions of sexuality, for fear of upsetting viewers' sensibilities, meant that many in the audience did not appear to make this connection at all within Rama's segment. Although the filmmakers had included Rama's testimony in the hope that it would gently springboard discussion about this issue, it seemed that many viewers had misinterpreted it. Some villagers thought that Rama's unmarried state was the result of a curse, or a possession by bad spirits, or that it was her own fault that she was not married, while others seemed to think that she had been made ill and lacked physical strength because of the *excision*. As a result of this discussion, some of the men, when speaking of *excision*, assumed sex would be more enjoyable for them with an unexcised woman. They also worried that an excised woman could never be sexually satisfied; in the film, Tostan supervisor Mademba stated, 'I would prefer to be with someone who is not excised, but what is to be done?' Interestingly, I learned from conversation with the Tostan volunteer intern involved in the screening of the film in Casamance, that (much to her indignation), Mademba was one of a number of Tostan supervisors whose daughters were continuing to be excised, with their knowledge.

Later in 2009, the final version of *L'Appel de Diégoune* (now entitled *Walking the Path of Unity* in English) was screened at the launch of a film festival on children's rights at the UNICEF headquarters in New York, and ultimately shown in cities in Canada, Croatia, Guinea, India and South Korea (Tostan 2009b). An accompanying Tostan press release claimed that the film was 'written and directed by the rural community of Diégoune […] and produced in collaboration with NGOs Tostan and Respect' (ibid.); a statement of 'partnership' that overstated somewhat the role (and control) of the Diégoune community in the production of the film. The film was also screened to 'diaspora groups' in Europe, as well as at a 'government-sponsored conference on female genital cutting in the Netherlands' (ibid.), and was made available for viewing via Tostan's Facebook page and YouTube. In this way, the film played a dual role, as an 'awareness-raising' tool targeted at local communities, and also as a way to promote Tostan's message and activities to its international 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8) including donors such as UNICEF.

## Concluding discussion: public secrets

In Casamance, both the female and male initiation rituals (the *ñakay* and the *bukut,* respectively) are knowledge transfer rituals, and have hitherto been viewed as parallel and complementary in

the minds of Jola communities, in form, meaning and intent. In contrast, in Casamance as elsewhere in Senegal and the region, for Tostan, the genital cutting element of the female ritual alone is communicated to communities through its programme and film as being universally and gravely harmful to women's health, and to be abandoned. This intervention has impacted on beneficiary communities regarding how they now view *excision* (particularly in relation to its health impacts), and how they speak about it, especially in public. In the analysis that follows, I explore how knowing and unknowing, knowledge and ignorance, interface through the discourses and practices around FGC in Casamance of local actors and the NGO itself, in the wake of this intervention. I take the view here that:

> Knowledge and ignorance can be conceived as poles of a continuum that also includes partial, inexact, uncertain, provisional and uneven knowledge. But ignorance and knowledge also have much in common. Like knowledge, ignorance can be an important resource deployed strategically by organisations. (Heimer 2012: 20)

I also follow McGoey's understanding of 'strategic ignorance' and 'social unknowing' as 'help[ing] both to maintain and to disrupt social and political orders, allowing both governors and the governed to deny awareness of things it is not in their interest to acknowledge' (McGoey 2012b: 6).

As a foreigner undertaking ethnographic research in the Casamance region, I found it difficult to gain 'knowledge' about FGC by posing direct questions, as these always resulted in brief, normative answers. Unsurprisingly, any formal interviews I conducted as well as those I observed being undertaken by Tostan as part of its evaluation activities revealed more about how people spoke about the custom, including what aspects or issues they chose to focus on, than about their everyday practices. Many of the people in Elounou, especially female Tostan participants, were used to being interviewed by outsiders and appeared to be ready with what they considered to be the 'correct' answers to questions about *excision*. Furthermore, as elsewhere in Senegal, *excision* was not a topic of quotidian conversation or concern in the community. In addition, my status as a foreigner and my connection with Tostan meant that I generally avoided bringing up the subject, so as not to reinforce this association in the minds of my interlocutors; in a similar way to the ethnographer Heidi Skramstad, who researched women's identities in an urban Mandinka community in The Gambia, I found that, in relation to the 'mutedness' surrounding the practice of *excision*, sometimes 'the mutedness was actually mine' (Skramstad 2008: 43).

Consequently, I found myself initially ignorant of the physical form of *excision* practised in the

village, although in this regard, as an outsider, I was not alone. Although it is difficult to determine what physical 'type' of cutting takes place during the *sunay* due to the secrecy surrounding the act (and the young age of many of the initiates who cannot afterwards recall the experience with much accuracy), both my own and other research indicated that partial clitoridectomy (excision of the whole or part of the clitoris, sometimes including excision of the labia minora) was likely the most common form of cutting practised; according to Dellenborg's (2007) research in Kalounaye, the tip of the clitoris is excised. Ousmane (the ICP in Elounou) invited me on several occasions to attend as women were giving birth at the health post. I was initially uncomfortable with this proposal, as I thought that perhaps a labouring woman would not appreciate my own presence as a stranger, and I was also aware of the 'taboo' surrounding childbirth in Jola society (van Tilburg 1998). However, Ousmane encouraged me to attend and I found that my presence was largely ignored by the women on each occasion, occupied as they were with giving birth. I did my best to assist by soothing and fanning them, in the presence of local midwives. I noticed on these occasions that there was no sign of any infibulation around the genital areas of the three women whose labours I attended, and although it was difficult to assess (as it was of course inappropriate and invasive to look too closely), I concluded that the *excision* the women had undergone seemed relatively uninvasive, probably involving some removal of the labia minora and clitoris. Furthermore, *excision* in these cases did not appear to impede the process of childbirth. In contrast to the description by the Diégoune ICP whose account of *excision* clearly implied infibulation, I came to the same conclusion as Dellenborg, that partial clitoridectomy was likely the form practised locally. Dellenborg found only one woman in her fieldwork area to be 'closed,' remarking that, 'there were local variations that seemed to depend upon the preference of the individual circumciser and of the girl's female kin' (Dellenborg 2007: 122).

As evident in the description of the *ñakay,* as well as the incident in Elounou related to the drumming, I suggest that a form of strategic unknowing was employed by some community members in regard to FGC. Gershon's understanding of 'pragmatic ignorance' may apply here: 'a not knowing which exists in response to certain structural necessities' (Gershon 2000: 103); in this case, the 'structural necessity' (ibid.) on the part of 'knowing strategists' (Kea 1997: 1) such as Bintou to 'not know' that *excision* was probably still practised by certain members of her community, because being seen to know this may compromise her position as a local women's leader as well as her opportunity to gain a formal position of paid employment with Tostan (one of her stated hopes).

I also learned anecdotally that local Tostan staff members such as supervisors were also aware of the continuation of *excision*, even among their own ranks; however this was not something that was acknowledged publicly as it contrasted with the official narrative of willing abandonment, and would also have endangered their own positions. Potentially 'dangerous' knowledge about issues such as the ongoing practice of *excision* may be understood as knowledge 'out of place' (analogous to Mary Douglas' [1966] theory of dirt as dangerous 'matter out of place'). Rayner (2012: 111) argues that, 'knowledge out of place can be viewed as a form of information pollution, lying on the boundaries of what is organizationally knowable and not knowable; we can understand that it may be dangerous.' In this way, 'acknowledging potential information by admitting it to the realm of what is "known" may undermine the organizational principles of a society or organisation' (ibid.). In the context discussed here, I suggest that publicly acknowledging that *excision* may continue to be practised would undermine the narratives sustained by local actors aimed at securing present and potential future benefits for themselves and their communities within the development paradigm, via their ongoing association with NGOs such as Tostan. Such knowledge may also be considered in this context to be a 'public secret'; a 'knowing what not to know,' which Michael Taussig argues is the most powerful form of social knowledge (Taussig 1999: 6-7).

Similarly, I suggest that, at the institutional level, Tostan exercised a form of 'strategic ignorance' about a number of aspects of *excision* practices in Casamance. Although the NGO could easily have had access to 'local' knowledge of the practices and related attitudes of its target beneficiaries (via its regional staff who were deeply embedded in local societies), including what physical 'type' of cutting is commonly performed in the region (i.e. partial cliteridectomy, and not the much more serious infibulation), as well as the equivalence of the male and female rites within the social schemas of local groups,[37] in practice official policy 'ignored' these particularities to ensure that its established message about the harmful consequences on women's health (particularly in relation to childbirth) was communicated locally. As McGoey (2012a: 554) argues, 'knowing what not to know is one of the indispensable forms of social and political knowledge,' and strategic ignorance of the features described here of *excision* in Casamance in favour of public testimonies enabled Tostan as an organisation to all the more easily condemn the

[37] As I argue in the previous chapter, Tostan's exclusive focus on genital cutting carried out on females as a harmful practice can be traced to its position within the globalised politics of development (heavily influenced in this regard by the political concerns of Western feminism and Western cultural ideas of sexuality); thus pointing to the 'top-down' nature of the intervention, in contrast to its official image as a 'grassroots' alternative.

practice, as well as to promote the idea that Jola communities had definitively abandoned it. This was equally a form of 'pragmatic ignorance' (Gershon 2000: 103), as it enabled the organisation to implement its standard curriculum within beneficiary communities, thereby fulfilling its own objectives and the interests of its donors.

Focusing on the reported testimonies and declarations of beneficiaries instead of their actual practices, Tostan was able to employ such strategic ignorance, or 'practices of obfuscation and deliberate insulation from unsettling information,' in order to command resources (McGoey 2012a: 555): in this case external support contingent on the apparent success of its programme in encouraging the abandonment of FGC. Consequently, the 'pragmatic ignorance' exercised by local staff and community members was, I argue, the direct result of these actors' comprehension that Tostan's activities relied on the implementation of a standardised education programme in their region, a programme largely based on external cultural and political understandings of FGC.

Moreover, through this curriculum, as well as through ancillary methods such as the screening of its 'awareness-raising' film, Tostan had fostered the knowledge locally that *excision* seriously affects women's ability to bear children, even in light of evidence to the contrary (i.e. the fact that local women are clearly able to bear children, and many bear numerous children). In this regard, Bintou stated quite bluntly to her class of female Tostan participants: 'Now you know why it [*excision*] is bad. It's because you can't have as many children as you want' (Fieldnotes 20/06/09). As a result of this understanding, and in contrast to Tostan's official goal of communicating *excision* as a human rights violation, discussion in Elounou centred around the fear of women not being able to have several, or even any children.

As argued above, the form of FGC practised in Casamance likely varied somewhat, although the most invasive form (infibulation) was certainly uncommon or even unknown, as most accounts of *sunay* make no reference to suturing of any kind. Consequently, the type practised in the region is quite unlikely to lead to most of the effects (apart from potential haemorrhage) that the Tostan programme claims, i.e. 'infection, haemorrhage, psychological trauma, retention of urine, cysts, frigidity, difficulties in childbirth, fistulas, sterility' (*Kobi 2 Guide du Facilitateur,* page 20). However, because the NGO's programme is not tailored to different regional and ethnic contexts (apart from its translation into the appropriate local language), all participants were taught that these are the effects of the practice and some came to believe that all of the above could result from *excision*.

Finally, a measure of strategic ignorance was also evident in relation to the production of *The Call of Diégoune,* as illustrated in the management's ultimate choice to ignore the finding of the Belgian filmmakers that discussions about sexual desire and *excision* were not entirely taboo in the village. This finding could potentially have destabilised Tostan's institutionalised 'non-confrontational' approach (Sauer 2007) premised on the existence of a universal taboo among practising populations about the topic of female sexuality, an approach viewed publicly as one of the cornerstones of Tostan's success. In addition, despite receiving feedback from local actors that the ICP's monologue in the film describing the biological facts of female anatomy and childbirth were likely to shock many of its viewers in Casamance, the final decision was made to ignore this and include the controversial segment. This decision may have been taken in the knowledge that the film was also targeted at donors and external supporters in Europe and the United States, with the consequent requirement to illustrate Tostan's educational approach that emphasises the transmission of biomedical 'knowledge.'

In opposing *excision*, approaches such as these that involve the strategic use of knowledge and ignorance by a variety of actors have helped to advance Tostan as an organisation within a wider epistemological movement that defines all forms of FGC as harmful. The political context and motivation is a Western feminist concern for women's rights and women's sexuality (that assumes a state of patriarchal oppression due to tradition or religion etc.); indeed, on the theme of ignorance, the prevailing concern for women's sexual pleasure has arguably led to a reversal of a historical state of 'ignorance' regarding the clitoris (see Laqueur 1990) to 'ignorance' of the foreskin. This understanding is a political and cultural perspective, I argue, and one that is rarely interrogated in the development world, as women's disadvantage in relation to men is taken as a given. Furthermore, in ignoring the diverse ways in which men and women's social identities are reproduced in different contexts (e.g. in Casamance through events such as female and male initiation), Tostan's activities may in fact be 'anti-gender' in their aim, by, as Ivan Illich put it, contributing to 'the sad loss of gender' through ignorance of the complementarity and difference of the sexes in favour of what he calls 'the modern myth of sexual equality' embedded in 'the regime of economic sex' (Illich 1990). In this regard, official 'unknowing' on the part of Tostan of the complex and often contradictory realities and responses of project stakeholders is a key element of activities aimed at maintaining the rhetoric of partnership and grassroots participation on which its work is premised. As I have attempted to show here, the exercise of 'strategic ignorance' by a range of actors in this context highlights 'the value of ignorance in procuring more resources' (McGoey 2012a: 555).

I conclude by suggesting that in relation to *excision*, Tostan does not fully succeed in its stated objective to change behaviour (i.e. facilitating the 'abandonment of FGC'); however, as Mosse (2005: 8) points out, 'success' in a development institution is in fact generated through a stabilised narrative of events via the enrolment and continued support of an 'interpretive community.' In short, 'power lies in the narratives that maintain an organisation's own definition of the problem' (ibid.). In the chapter that follows, I take up this theme in my focus on Tostan's founder and Director and the narratives and practices she employs in her pursuit of 'legitimation' (Hilhorst 2003: 218) for the organisation.

# Chapter 5

## Dancing with the Powerful: Tostan's Founder

### Introduction

In this chapter, the analytical focus turns to Tostan's founder and Director, Molly Melching, a key actor in refining and promulgating the narratives that 'maintain [a development organisation's] own definition of the problem,' wherein the power to define project success lies (Mosse 2005: 8). I take the view that, like many NGO leaders, Melching is a 'fairly unusual human being,' whom Paul Ekins characterises as 'someone with a clear intellectual grasp of social trends and forces, an understanding of commercial and local and national bureaucratic processes, an empathy with and sensitivity to the poor and, usually, a willingness to live on a low income' (Ekins 1995: 136). As Hailey and James (2004: 345) note, there is surprisingly scant research into the 'meso' issues of how the 'people and organisations that implement much development activity are managed, motivated, or lead,' adding that the nature of leadership in the non-profit sector is 'highly personalised.' Analysis of Melching's discursive practices and her conceptions of the knowledge (and ignorance) of her interlocutors aims to shed light on these issues, showing how she pursues 'legitimation' for her work, and that of Tostan as a whole: 'in order to survive, NGOs need to find legitimation as "intermediary organisations doing good for the development of others", a quest that is complicated because they function in different domains, where different values and relationships prevail' (Hilhorst 2003: 218).

I preface this analysis by situating the Tostan founder's activities within a tradition of social 'helping' and the establishment of 'benevolent identities,' powerfully documented by Laura Agustín's research into those working to 'rescue' migrant sex workers in Europe (Agustín 2005, 2007a, 2007b). Writing about middle-class women reformers in 19th century Europe who worked to identify and rehabilitate lower-class women designated as 'prostitutes,' Agustín characterises the growth of this phenomenon as 'the Rise of the Social' (2007a: 192): 'When a newly empowered bourgeoisie came to believe that their high level of evolution and sensibility qualified them to rehabilitate inferiors. Educated women carved out an employment sphere through

discovering a mission to save the less fortunate.' This period constituted 'a specific time in history in which those doing charitable works entered into a governmental relationship with the objects of their charity, and created themselves as important social actors in the process' (Agustín 2005). In this context, social helping became a profession that 'relied on identifying subjects and then placing them in closed spaces where they could be worked upon and controlled' (ibid.). A key element of this process was the production of discourse, which Agustín (2007: 8-9) understands as:

> A language or way of talking that develops, through use, a series of conventions and becomes institutionalised through use. The discourse defines the socially accepted, mainstream or apparently official version, the version that seems obvious or natural. At the same time, this discourse always leaves out experiences and points of view that do not fit, silencing difference and producing unease in those who do not see themselves included. To understand the concept of discourse is to remember that what we say about any given subject is always constructed, and there are only partial truths.

Agustín argues that reformers constructed the category of 'prostitute' through a discourse of exclusion and stigmatisation, despite the fact that research from the period showed that women considered prostitutes 'did not see themselves as prostitutes, victims or "fallen women"; instead, they were working-class women who sold sex from time to time or during periods between other kinds of employment' (Agustín 2005). I refer to this analysis in order to show how, similarly, the 'helping' discourses employed for the benefit of global audiences by activists such as Melching, portray the African women and girls who have undergone customary genital cutting practices as engaging in deviant behaviour, and therefore construct them as a category of persons in need of rehabilitation or rescue; the latter are victims of ignorance and in need of 'saving,' even if they do not see themselves as victims, nor see a causality between FGC practices and health problems and death. An article written by Melching for the US broadcaster CNN illustrates this rendering of young girls as the object of her helping discourse, in the process presenting herself as a potential saviour figure:

> Of course, there are things that are difficult for outsiders to accept. I have had to live through the sights and stories of little girls going through female genital cutting, which has led to hemorrhage and even death. And you feel outrage when seeing this. But with outrage alone, you can maybe save one girl, possibly a few girls. You need to understand fully and involve villagers to find a culturally relevant strategy that can reach a critical mass of people who can collectively make such practices disappear. (Melching 2013)

Such a portrayal (aimed at an external audience) of customary female genital alteration practices in Africa as invariably leading to severe injury or death, despite the great variety in the physical

form and impact of the procedures, illustrates the narrative Melching communicates in order to enrol external stakeholders in Tostan's project and thus gain support for and justify its intervention. This is achieved through an emotional appeal to the sense of 'outrage' felt by the reader at her description of the problematic ('hemorrhage and even death'), while simultaneously capitalising on the presumed ignorance of her readership of the context(s) to which she refers in her 'helping discourses' (Agustín 2007a: 192). As Agustín (ibid.) observes:

> Helping discourses describe objects needing help: the poor, the disadvantaged, victims, undocumented migrants, the socially excluded. Some social agents refer to offering services, others to saving and rescue, still others to empowerment… these projects are widely considered rational and benign, and those who carry them out as charitable and solidary.

My analytical objective in this chapter is to both interrogate and look beyond the Director's statements as a 'social agent' (ibid.), to show some of the practices and representations employed in her everyday activities with Tostan. Mosse (2005: 8) argues that 'effective agency (and power) in development requires the strategic generation/manipulation of a network of actors within different discourses "who become partly, though hardly ever completely, enrolled in the 'project' of some other person or persons" (Long 1992: 23).' As I argue in this chapter, in common with other innovative NGO leaders (see Hilhorst 2003; Allen 2013), one of Melching's key concerns is to enrol a variety of actors in the Tostan project, from North American newspaper readers, to the staff she works with on a day-to-day basis, to the global power brokers whose support she seeks at international events. I contend that Melching's ability to bridge different worlds makes her an 'interface expert,' a person who is 'informed from different angles, and able to speak in different capacities, [which] often gives her an advantage over the specialists she deals with at any one particular interface' (Hilhorst 2003: 182). I suggest that, in this process, she has become an 'international NGO personality' who has gained power because she has 'master[ed] languages prevailing in different domains, and can use this strategic knowledge to advance [her] interests at different interfaces' (ibid.: 218).

I illustrate these arguments through focus on two primary zones of interface: the Director's relations with staff in the Dakar office; and the ways in which narratives about her life are officially communicated through published materials and public performances targeted at 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8) including international policymakers, donors and funding agencies. By examining depictions of Melching's story (including the 'narratives of self-production' [Kea and Roberts-Holmes 2013: 96] underpinning her own words), I take the view

that, like many NGO leaders who speak the language of international human rights and are involved in cultural affairs, Melching's role includes that of a 'translator,' who communicates particular narratives 'up and down' (Merry 2006: 42). Reflecting on this concept, I also draw on the discourses of staff members about their working relations with the Director in Dakar, bearing in mind that the perspectives of informants are themselves self-constructed 'narratives.'

Moreover, in common with Agustín (2005), I presume that as someone working for the well-being of groups whose behaviour is identified as problematic, Tostan's founder and Director is doubtless propelled by sincere motivations of empathy (as highlighted in her biography [Molloy 2013] and an interview in *Forbes* magazine [Koteles 2013]). However, my aim is to look beyond intent and analyse Melching's practices as part of a broader social and political pattern that involves 'theorising, proposing and acting on behalf of the well-being of groups identified as problematic' (Agustín 2005), in this case, women and girls in Senegal. I begin by showing how, through portrayals of Melching's life story in narrative form as a version of the 'American myth' in biography (Spengemann and Lundquist 1965), a symbolic identity is created, designed to reinforce Tostan's foundation story, with the aim of conferring legitimacy and gaining support for the organisation's activities.

## *'However Long the Night'*: the making of an 'American myth'

In person, Melching is a charismatic figure: a tall, heavyset, energetic woman in her mid-60s. Sporting dangling earrings and a colourful flowing scarf in a loose fusion of Western and Senegalese attire, she can be spotted at the Tostan international office in Dakar when not travelling for conferences, award ceremonies or other public relations events. Communications and public relations are her forte and she is equally confident speaking in French, Wolof and English. Articulate and measured in her formal speech, with an affable Midwestern patois in informal moments, her main activities as Executive Director involve fundraising, public relations, programme writing, delivering lectures, and meetings with VIPs (e.g. donors, governmental ministers, journalists and ambassadors). Melching travels a great deal internationally, including trips during my fieldwork to South Africa, the US, the UK, Sweden, Switzerland, India and France.

As introduced in Chapter 2, as part of the 'arrival trope' (Pratt 1986: 31) often employed in official narratives about Melching's development work in Africa, we see words like 'inspiration'

and ‘sacrifice’ used to frame her life story: emphasis is placed on the perceived benefits she has renounced in her choice to live and work in the region (e.g. Armstrong 1998: Linsky 2010). Whether the voice is that of Melching herself, or a reported narrative by the Tostan PR team or sympathetic journalists, in terms evocative of the missionary endeavour, these portrayals attempt to connect her ‘personal experience with [her] great destiny’ (Spengemann and Lundquist 1965: 505). Relevant here, I suggest, is the concept of autobiography and the ‘American myth,’ which Spengemann and Lundquist (1965: 516) refer to as ‘an unswerving belief in the individual as a definable identity, linked to the divine.’ These authors argue that:

> The act of writing about oneself brings together the personal, unassimilated experiences of the writer and the *shared values of his* [sic] *culture*. The act of recollection becomes an *act of creation* and an act of self-evaluation at the same time […] when a man writes his autobiography… he creates a *fictive character* who undergoes adventures drawn from the author’s memory and a *narrative persona* who reports these experiences and evaluates them according to their place in the cultural pattern.’ (ibid.: 502, emphasis added)

An example of this act of creation of a ‘fictive character’ and the ‘narrative persona’ (ibid.) employed to communicate it is Melching’s official biography, penned by US author and journalist Aimee Molloy (2013). This book, published by Tostan donor The Skoll Foundation, is also a promotional tool for Tostan’s work: following publication, Melching undertook a two-month, nine-city book tour across North America, sponsored by the Foundation, attending bookstores, universities, and seminars. The biography tells of Melching’s upbringing in a ‘conservative’ religious and political home in the American Midwest (Molloy 2013: 45), and how this outlook was overturned after she started attending the University of Illinois in the late 1960s, influenced by the feminist and antiwar movements. Similar to many of the American volunteers I met at Tostan three decades later (see Chapter 6), Melching ‘backpacked’ around Europe during a stay living in France on a college exchange programme in the 1970s. During this time she volunteered with a charity group working in the Algerian quarter in Caen, where she had her ‘first experience with development work and how it can go wrong…: “this was my first lesson in understanding the best way to really help others. People have to be listened to, involved and engaged from the very beginning”’ (Molloy 2013: 42).

I suggest that this anecdote, in which Melching learns about the ‘best’ to way to help others, may be conceptualised culturally via Spengemann and Lundquist’s notion of an American autobiographical myth, which, ‘in its most general form, describes human history as a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection’ (1965: 503). In Melching’s case, the ‘myth’ is consolidated

through the account of her arrival to Senegal, documented in numerous publications in the traditional and 'new' media. This tale invariably begins by grounding the narrative in Melching's arrival for the first time in Senegal, usually described in romanticised terms: she 'fell in love' with life in Senegal… she 'immediately felt at home in Africa' (Gandaho 2006: 28); 'It was an indescribable feeling deep inside… this is where I'm supposed to be' (Crewe 2011). Following this arrival, Melching felt she had the ability to contribute to Senegalese society 'as a teacher' (Gandaho 2006: 38).[38] Portraying her choice to live in Senegal in such providential terms, we see elements of 'myth-making' in her biography, where the author's stances are:

> Forms of self-knowledge and self-portrayal assumed for literary and cultural purposes … when [she] comes to write [her] autobiography - whether [she] seeks to discover [herself] through it or to publicize what [she] has already found, the writer must adopt some consistent, overriding view of [herself] and [her] past. [She] must identify the 'I' which unites all [her] past experiences. (Spengemann and Lundquist 1965: 514)

The theme of pilgrimage to a point of perfection or enlightenment, both for Melching personally, and for the people she wishes to help, recurs throughout these narratives, e.g. 'she felt she came alive too and living among [the Senegalese] helped her become a better person' (Crewe 2011); 'sometimes people say that I have made sacrifices by living in Africa but I see it as just the opposite - I think I have learned and received more than I have given' (Gandaho 2006: 38). The purpose of this focus on pilgrimage and enlightenment is, I argue, to communicate an engaging personal story about Tostan's founder in a way that is intelligible and appealing to the organisation's (largely North American) target audience, part of a broader strategy of image management to appeal to potential donors (individual and corporate), policymakers, prospective volunteers, and academics, inter alia. As Hilhorst (2003: 182) observes, a key characteristic of a successful NGO leader is mastery of the 'artful skill' of communication, evident in an ability to 'adjust her story to bridge different life worlds, and to convey its meaning in such a way that the notion of common experiences and interests could easily evolve.'

In this way, official accounts of Melching's life story usually follow a common pattern, in the process constructing a 'mythologizing foundation narrative' (Allen 2013: 21) for Tostan. Melching herself is positioned centrally within this narrative, as an unlikely or accidental hero who 'didn't go to change the culture,' but became an unwitting catalyst for 'social change'

[38] Writing about White, middle-class Americans adopting children from China, Paloma Gay y Blasco (2012: 336) describes how similarly, her subjects' self-representations frame their actions as 'unavoidable, a destiny to be fulfilled' which, importantly, takes place within the context of a similarly 'exotic' location.

(Linsky 2010). The narrative also conceptualises the targets of her intervention (women and girls in Senegal) and the problem ('female genital cutting'). Melching's motivation to combat FGC is because it's an 'outrage' (Melching 2013), but within her story she also cites as a turning point the moment when her own daughter came home from school one day and asked to be 'cut': 'once her own daughter was implicated, everything changed for Melching: she felt that she had both a reason and a right to address female genital cutting' (Bedell 2014). However, curiously, this part of the narrative was something that I had never heard about while actually working with Tostan (even though her story is a well-worn tale familiar to all the urban-based staff, at least), and indeed the particulars of this element of the story, which has only been added to the narrative in recent years, often vary widely in the reporting. In one high profile version of Melching's story, published in *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof's bestselling book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide,* the implication was that Melching was so deeply embedded in a society that practises 'FGC' that her own daughter felt pressure to be 'cut':

> In her own family, Molly saw how peer pressure for cutting was more powerful than any law. Molly had married a Senegalese man, and they had a daughter named Zoé—who made a startling demand. 'I want to be cut,' Zoé told her mother. 'I promise I won't cry.' All of Zoé's friends were being cut, and she didn't want to be left out. (Kristof and WuDunn 2009: 223)

However, Melching's then-husband and father of her daughter was not in fact Senegalese, but a fellow American aid worker, and, living as they were at that time in the city of Thiès (dominated by the Wolof and Sereer ethnic groups who do not practice FGC), it seems rather unlikely that 'all of Zoé's friends' were to undergo FGC, which is generally only practised in Senegal by the Fulani, Mandinka, Jola and Soninké groups, who constitute a tiny minority of the inhabitants of this region. Furthermore, the reported age of Melching's daughter during this apparently catalytic event also varies widely: in one source she is reported to be 9 years old at the time (Molloy 2013: 119) and in another, 12 years old (Bedell 2014).

Given these contradictions, we are reminded of Agustín's argument cited above about discourse: 'to understand the concept of discourse is to remember that what we say about any given subject is always constructed, and there are only partial truths' (2007a: 9). These 'partial truths' form the essential basis for Melching's narratives, and help to engage and enrol her audience, and provide legitimation for Tostan's work. As a person involved in 'social work,' we can see in Melching's representations elements of how 'the social invented not only its objects but the necessity to do

something about them, and thereby its own need to exist' (Agustín 2007a: 107). By placing its founder's own experience and emotions at the centre of narratives about FGC, in a subtly salvific role, Tostan as an organisation claims the power to define the problem, and as a vehicle for superior knowledge, holds the solution. Melching's personal story offers a character with which the audience can identify, given a presumed lack of familiarity with the context in which the narrative is situated. Below, I turn to another area in which Melching, as an NGO leader, undertakes to employ her understandings of 'Other' people's cultural 'knowledge,' in her interactions with her Dakar-based Tostan staff.

## 'God is with us': the Director's relationships with her staff

As I show in Chapters 6 and 7, the dynamic in the Tostan office in Dakar is a rich fusion of the local and the international. For Tostan's Director, cultural understanding and the cultural 'orientation' or training of incoming foreigners to the organisation is imperative due to the importance she places on understanding the culture and the lingua franca (Wolof) of Senegal. Her discourse is often peppered with references to 'the whole new world that opened up' to her because of her fluency in Wolof:

> One of the things that helps is learning the language. Absolutely. If you see that I've been able to do what I have been able to do with Tostan and in the programme it's because I speak Wolof. When I started learning Wolof, a whole new world opened up to me. And the fact that I learned Wolof allowed people to be… to tell me more things, to trust me more, and to take me into the fold more and into the theatre more. (Interview, Dakar, January 28, 2011)

The local staff were very impressed by Melching's Wolof skills, with one young staff member stating, 'she speaks better Wolof than my father!' due to her knowledge of Wolof phrases and proverbs that had largely disappeared from the vocabulary of the younger generation, in favour of French. Her mastery of their language, and her position of authority as Director evidently ensured many of the staff held Melching in quite an amount of awe. An American volunteer who worked with her in 2008 described Melching as having 'managed to enmesh herself in Senegalese society in a way that's a little too effective,' suggesting that she capitalised on the more hierarchical characteristics of Wolof society (interview, Dakar, 2011). As I explore below, the Director seemingly did attempt to cultivate relationships of loyalty and patronage (c.f. Diop 1981; Foley 2010) in the way in which she ran her organisation and interacted with staff on a personal level, perhaps also a product of the neoliberal business culture characteristic of the modern day

workplace (both in Senegal and globally), in which workers' formal rights are increasingly eroded and fragmented, leading to their dependence on the benevolence of employers (Leitner et al. 2007). As I show, these relations of power were often characterised by conflict, tension and misunderstanding.

A recurring topic of discussion and concern among Tostan staff during my fieldwork was their salaries (a narrative central to Chapter 7 of this thesis), which they perceived as unfairly low, especially given the international profile of the organisation. In conversation among themselves, the staff often directed their grievances more or less solely at the Director, whom many of them seemed to believe was personally 'blocking' their attempts to have a *grille de salaire* (salary schedule) produced in a transparent way. Regardless of whether Melching was or was not personally vetoing this, the prevailing belief was that she was opposed to standardising and increasing staff salaries. Instead, the staff saw the Director as cultivating personalised relationships of dependence or reciprocity, via her occasional displays of generosity to individual employees and volunteers, often handing out personalised gifts here and there, particularly following a trip abroad. These gifts included books (usually of the 'self-improvement' genre, in English or in French, or textbooks for staff members who were studying part-time) and sometimes clothes or shoes. On one occasion, returning from the United States, Melching distributed some Hershey's chocolates among the office members. These were gobbled up by most of the volunteers straightaway. I was surprised to see that many others had left the chocolates untouched on their desks, which seemed unusual as staff were often to be found nibbling at their desks on *geerte sukar* (sugared peanuts) or *bonbons* and evidently appreciated a sweet treat. However, it turned out that some of them were suspicious of this gift and in a recurring pattern would decline to eat food Melching had given to them as they believed she harnessed very powerful *maraboutage* 'magic,'[39] and that they would be somehow jinxed by eating her food; perhaps made to feel or behave a certain way, or some kind of misfortune might befall them. Indeed there was a prevailing belief that a key element of Melching's modus operandi was that she had a very powerful *marabout* facilitating her success and access to money and power.

Frustrations and suspicions abounded among many at the Dakar office at the Director's perceived

[39] In West Africa, *marabouts* are Islamic spiritualists, ranging from *imams* (orthodox Islamic clerics versed in the Qu'ran who preside over services at local mosques), to local healers and seers who combine Islam with indigenous beliefs and practices (see Cruise O'Brien 1975; Dilley 2004).

ad hoc and personalised approach to rewarding and motivating staff. Perhaps reflecting their own understandings of Melching's actions (which doubtless may have had diverse motivations), many of the staff believed that she deliberately focused on some individuals as a way of establishing such patronage-type relationships, cultivating personal gratitude and even dependency, at the expense of standardising salaries and benefits for all in a transparent way. More than one member of staff expressed the belief that the Director's acts of generosity were motivated by a desire to ensure that 'everyone liked her' and to cultivate a sense of personal indebtedness to guarantee loyalty. Loyalty was certainly of paramount importance to Melching, who was known to get very upset when certain staff members she felt she had nurtured left for better positions elsewhere, for example. This had led to a situation where three mid-ranking administrative staff members, quitting at different times, had given only a day's notice of departure out of the fear that their new opportunity would somehow be sabotaged.

Melching frequently referred to Tostan as a 'family,' often addressing all-staff emails to '*chère famille de Tostan*.' Indeed several of her direct family members were involved with Tostan during the period of my research (including her daughter, her sister, and her nephew). In addition, many of the office staff in Thiès, where the organisation had been originally set up, were also related to one another, and there was one staff member, who rumour had it, 'couldn't be fired' no matter what transgressions he committed, as his father had helped to set up the organisation. Many of these actors often expressed public loyalty and affection for the organisation, but this situation clearly led to some evident management problems. For example, when I joined Tostan as a volunteer in 2007, there were many complaints from the volunteers about the *gardien* (guard) of the house they occupied in Thiès. The latter, who could speak no French and therefore could not communicate with the majority of the house's residents, was rarely to be found in the evenings to let residents without keys into the house after work, and when he was to be found, was often asleep 'on the job.' The volunteers, learning that the guard was a relative of the National Coordinator, began to suspect that this was why (despite their numerous complaints) no attempts were made by the local administration to improve his performance.

Whether or not the Director was fully aware of the beliefs and assumptions swirling around her, especially about her perceived ability to harness the magic of *marabouts*, a story related by one Dakar staff member illustrates her communicative approach towards her local employees, giving an indication of her conception of local ways of understanding the world. 29-year-old Ngagne was one of the middle-ranking financial managers in the Dakar office. A professed lover of

American culture, he spoke English better than most of the other local staff as he loved to watch Hollywood movies, and enjoyed interacting with the American volunteers, eagerly picking up on the latest slang. Ngagne was quite unusual among the Senegalese in being an overt sceptic of Islam and religion in general. In 2008, *la Direction* decided to send him to Washington DC for a week to attend a training session for non-profit administrators. He was to stay at the home of the Washington-based Director of Communications (Melching's nephew) during his sojourn. The key issue at first was to secure Ngagne a visitor visa for the United States, which is often difficult for Senegalese citizens to obtain unless through the auspices of an organisation such as Tostan. The widespread belief in the office was that Melching had good contacts in the US Embassy in Dakar, and indeed, to his great delight Ngagne received his 90-day US visa promptly. He had always wanted to visit America, and had applied to the US Embassy for a visa in a personal capacity before coming to work with Tostan, only to be rejected, with no reason given.

Shortly prior to his departure, Melching took Ngagne aside and give him 25,000 CFA (around £30) of her own money, suggesting that he to go to the market in downtown Dakar and buy some small souvenirs to give to people he met in Washington. Informing him that this gesture would be much appreciated, she said it would pave the way for good relations with the people he would meet. Melching also advised him about places of interest to visit in the US capital, and gave him information on day-to-day life, such as where to go to buy a sandwich and how the tipping system worked, information Ngagne absorbed with gratitude. In addition to offering this advice, however, Melching warned him that under no circumstances was he to even consider overstaying his visa (as had happened in the past with another staff member who had travelled to the US on a short-stay visa, never to return). This warning (as Ngagne saw it) was communicated as follows: asking him if he was familiar with the principle of 'karma,' Melching told him of a particular woman, an American friend, who had run a language translation company with which Tostan had worked to translate its pedagogical materials into local languages. Recounting how this woman had died an agonising death in a car crash a few months before, Melching informed Ngagne that just prior to her death, the woman had 'betrayed' her, the implication being that this betrayal was linked to her subsequent tragic demise. Ngagne interpreted this as an attempt to unnerve him and ensure that he didn't 'betray' her too; however he was sceptical of this approach and unimpressed with what he saw as an attempt to spook him. Ngagne mentioned afterwards in conversation that he lost a lot of respect for the Director at that point (she had hitherto been someone he had greatly looked up to, he said), believing that she was trying to manipulate what she perceived to be the credulous and superstitious nature of the Senegalese to her own benefit. Instead, he was insulted

at what he considered a patronising approach that assumed his own gullibility and superstition: 'she [Melching] thinks I'm easily scared, like the *baaykat!'* (peasants, in Wolof), he grumbled.

Similarly, Melching often endeavoured to motivate her staff with statements such as 'if Tostan has known such success, it is because God is with us,' in an apparent appeal to the piety of her interlocutors. I observed that these types of pronouncements tended to meet with mixed reactions, with some of the younger staff in particular (like Ngagne) receiving them with scepticism. Perhaps aware of these tensions, Melching worked to maintain an overt sense of inclusivity and harmoniousness within the organisation, often sending emails around to all the staff with photos or messages from her trips abroad in an attempt to share her experiences and motivate them with news of Tostan's international recognition. The following email offers an illustration (my translation from the French, dated 17 October 2010):

> Hello everyone,
>
> Attached is the family photo at the launch of the initiative to promote the use of mobile phones by women ... Next to me is Hillary Clinton; Cherie Blair (in blue); the Women's Ambassador to President Obama, the Directors of Nokia, GSMA, and an NGO in India; a village representative; an operator from Afghanistan, and President Obama's Director of Innovations....
>
> Thank you! Molly

As illustrated in this brief email, Melching's day-to-day work representing Tostan involved interfacing with high-level politicians, corporate executives and other NGOs, at a range of exclusive international events. Below, I show how Melching, through a performance of speech and dance at a major international awards ceremony, acts as a 'broker of meaning' (Hilhorst 2003: 223) who endeavours to establish and reinforce Tostan's 'authenticity' by identifying it with grassroots development (by dancing 'for' her programme participants), while simultaneously tailoring her speech to appeal to the corporate orientation of the event's 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8).

## Adapting the narrative: a 'social entrepreneur,' dancing for the women of Senegal

One morning in April 2010 in Dakar, I encountered three staff members on the roof terrace of Tostan's office building, clustered around their usual breakfast of coffee and newspaper-wrapped bread rolls. They were engrossed in watching something on a laptop computer, and as I greeted them, Moussa, the junior HR manager, asked me if I had heard about 'Molly's dance.' 'She danced when she won the prize!' he exclaimed, as he invited me to watch the video with them. An email linking to the video online had circulated among the staff of Melching's performance following receipt of an award for 'social entrepreneurship' at the Skoll World Forum in Oxford, where she had performed what she called a 'traditional dance' on behalf of 'the women of Senegal' (Skoll World Forum 2010). The video of the awards ceremony showed Melching, who was the last of nine recipients to accept an award, making a speech of thanks, which she ended saying, 'I was thinking, how can I thank you for this wonderful award? And I thought, what if the women of Senegal were here? I know exactly what they would do. They would dance. So, I am going to dance…' Melching then began to wave her hands gracefully and turned towards the woman and man standing next to her on the podium, beaming and shaking her loose Senegalese-style robes as she swayed to a silent rhythm. As the crowd began to clap and cheer, she gestured at the pair (who were smiling and clapping rather awkwardly in response) to join in. Gyrating towards the suited man, she ended this short performance with a pelvic thrust in the direction of his crotch (a typical way to end a dance such as *sabar* or *mbalax* in Senegal). This rather awkward moment ended with the woman next to her (the Foundation's CEO), approaching Melching with a hug, who laughed and murmured to her, 'now I want my award!' (ibid.).

This performance became quite famous among the Tostan office staff. Everyone wanted to see the clip, and reactions to it varied. Most were fairly unaware of or uninterested in the prestige attached to this particular awards ceremony. (Indeed, a few months prior, Melching had sent an email around to the staff the day before a visit by representatives of the Skoll Foundation to the office, 'reminding' them to 'participate fully' in welcoming the representatives, as the visit was of 'capital importance to the future of Tostan'; most staff took these visits in their stride, paying little heed to the visiting VIPs). Some of the older women spoke in appreciation of the Director's performance, delighted at the incongruity of a *toubab* dancing Senegalese-style for other *toubabs*.[40] Others (particularly the young men) derided the performance, taking issue with the

[40] '*Toubab*' is generally used in Wolof to refer to foreigners/White people. I was told by various people in Senegal that its etymology is most likely a corruption of the Arabic word *tabib*, meaning doctor.

reference to 'the women of Senegal,' which one considered insulting to his mother: 'ask my mother if she [Melching] dances for her!' (Fieldnotes 25/4/10)

'Molly's dance' marked out this particular event in the memories of her staff back in Senegal, who otherwise took little notice of her representations at these types of international fora, perhaps partly because in recent years it has become her primary activity as Director. Since the 1997 Malicounda Declaration and the attendant growth in Tostan's international profile, Melching has developed an extensive network of contacts within the world of non-profit and multilateral organisations, as well as government, business and academia, which has helped to increase exposure for Tostan's work, particularly in the North American media. For example, in 2011, *Forbes* magazine named Melching 'one of the top ten women who empower other women worldwide,' while *Newsweek* magazine dubbed her one of '150 women who shake the world' (Tostan 2011a; 2011d), and she now features regularly at international events where major social and economic policies are shaped and marketed.

Since the 2010 Skoll Foundation award, Melching has come to be regularly referred to in the media as a 'social entrepreneur.' This concept was defined as follows, in a speech entitled '*New Directions in Philanthropy*' by the Skoll Foundation's CEO, Sally Osberg (Osberg 2009):

> The social entrepreneur's journey nearly always begins with inspiration - a challenge worth tackling and a personal tipping point, that existential moment when these remarkable individuals put to themselves the "if not me, who; if not now, when?" proposition - and then demands of our tipped and ripe social entrepreneur the creativity needed to come up with an innovative solution, the courage to mount the venture - often in the face of skepticism - and inexhaustible funds of fortitude to drive his or her solution through to fruition and market adoption.

The use of this type of language is characteristic of modern philanthropic bodies such as the Skoll Foundation,[41] that increasingly apply terminology adapted from the business world (e.g. 'mount the venture,' 'funds of fortitude,' 'market adoption' etc.) to their suggested solutions to poverty and other 'global challenges.' Social entrepreneurs such as Melching are referred to by the Foundation as 'innovators pioneering scalable solutions to global challenges' (ibid.). In this environment, Melching herself speaks the business world language of social entrepreneurship fluently. In her acceptance speech for the Skoll award she used a utility-maximising approach to

[41] Billionaire founder Jeff Skoll is the former president of the Internet auction firm eBay.

show the value of her work, stating that 'few activities in the development arena *deliver more value and leverage* than that of *investing* in female rights and education' (Skoll World Forum 2010, emphasis added). At the same awards ceremony a speaker from the multinational finance firm JP Morgan Chase described excitedly how 'social investment' would become 'one of the great, most powerful investment movements over the next decade or so' (ibid.).

By adapting the language used (e.g. using 'business-speak' to the appropriate audience) and her personal story for different audiences, as well as her 'translation' of Senegalese culture (illustrated in her dance performance) Tostan's Director works to develop a diverse international network on which to draw for collaboration and support for Tostan's activities. The cultivation of relationships within powerful policy-making circles is fuelled by the legitimacy provided by narratives communicating the perceived grassroots nature of the Tostan movement, offering a picture of authority and credibility on the international stage in a context where concepts such as 'bottom up community-led development' and 'local participation' are all-important.[42]

The story that Melching has to tell from the village of Malicounda offers a powerful narrative of people 'owning' their own development and social change in relation to a topic (FGC) that provokes much emotion on the global stage. Like other pioneer NGO leaders, I suggest that one of Melching's strengths is as a story-teller who tailors her stories, and how they are told, according to her audience. Hilhorst (2003: 181-182, emphasis in original), writing about NGO leaders, remarks that:

> It helps, then, to have a story that is grounded in experience and which represents a pioneer NGO. But a story is not a thing, it is a *representation* […] there are always multiple stories to tell about the same events and organisations […] it is not merely that different people have different interpretations: they change their stories according to different times, places and audiences.

Below, I explore an example of these activities to define and maintain a particular representation of Tostan's 'success' through story-telling, in this case, via the testimony of a Tostan participant named Marietou, whose story Melching interpreted at an event in New York, in 2010.

[42] Since the late 1990s, these 'last-first' approaches are increasingly to be found in the vocabularies of agencies such as the World Bank, where they have now become standard discursive devices, if not practices (c.f. Lewis and Mosse 2006; Cooke and Kothari 2001).

## '*A woman's worst nightmare*': interpreting the voice of 'the village'

> Melching is amazed at what Tostan has achieved and now travels to share it with other NGOs and governments. She often takes some of the 'incredible' villagers from Senegal and interprets their stories so their voices can be heard and they can 'guide us to do development in the right way.' It is this of which she is most proud.
>
> 'Turning Senegalese,' *Financial Times* (Crewe 2011)

> Much of the work I do for example involves interacting with donors and other partners. This is one aspect of the job I really enjoy. I meet with NGO leaders, UN partners, politicians in Africa and the US, as well as with community members, participants, traditional and religious leaders. I attend seminars and make presentations in many countries on the work the villagers are accomplishing to bring about positive change.
>
> 'Molly Melching: The Power of Conviction' (Gandaho 2006: 40)

In March 2010, Melching and Marietou Diarra—the latter described on the NGO's website as 'a Tostan program participant and social change agent' (Tostan 2010a)—made a presentation at the 'Women In The World' conference in New York.[43] A video recording of this was later posted online by the conference organisers under the title '*A Woman's Worst Nightmare,*' on which the following analysis is based (Women In The World 2010).

Marietou, a soft-spoken middle-aged woman, is from the village of Diabougou, one of the 'sister' villages of Malicounda Bambara that had famously renounced FGC at the first Tostan-organised 'Public Declaration' in 1998. Sitting next to Melching at a panel on the topic of FGC, hosted by ABC news anchor Diane Sawyer, Marietou, clad in a multicoloured wax *grand boubou* with matching *foulard,* told her story in Wolof, which Melching translated into English. Without hesitating, Marietou began her testimony, initially speaking in a matter-of-fact if slightly nervous tone, which Melching translated in the following manner (except where specified to the contrary, all direct quotations in the passage that follows are from Melching's English translation, ibid.).

'I was married at 13 years old' - Melching paused briefly - 'the next year I had a child, and it was

[43] According to the Tostan website, this event was attended by 'hundreds of influential women leaders from around the globe including Hillary Clinton, US Ambassador-at-large for Global Women's Issues, Melanne Verveer, award-winning actress, Meryl Streep and Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan' (Tostan 2010a).

a girl.' Marietou then stated that when the child was one year old, she was taken away from her and given to her older sister, because 'they told me, I was a child, and I couldn't take care of this baby.' Marietou then began to tell of another child that she had when Melching interrupted her, saying (in Wolof) 'tell them what happened to the first child.' Marietou returned to the subject of her first child, which Melching translated as follows: 'she said, that girl that I gave birth to who was given to my older sister, was taken by my older sister when she was three years old to the *luul*—which is the ceremony where they do the cutting—and afterwards I was told that she had died.' In this case, Melching had added the detail of the child's age (3 years old), which Marietou had not mentioned. Melching then translated as follows: 'And they told me that it was the spirits that had done it, they didn't associate it in any way with any kind of medical thing, it was the spirits that had taken my child'; however, in reality Marietou had made no reference in her Wolof testimony to the idea of medical causes.

Melching continued to translate Marietou's words, alternating between the first and third person in her translation, telling of how Marietou, at 18, had had a second child (which, Melching added, was a girl), named Adji Coumba. Speaking about this child, Marietou began to sob. Melching's voice also began to quiver as she translated, 'they took her to the ceremony without my knowing it… they did the tradition to her, and she died.' Marietou began to cry openly, as the camera zoomed in closer on her face, and Melching added that with the first child, as Marietou was so young, 'she didn't really understand, but this child she had for seven years…' Melching continued, her voice breaking: 'she said, that everyone was scared to tell her this, so they hid it from her, so she didn't know until later, that she had died […] no-one had told her that during this whole ceremony, which lasts sometimes for a long time, that her own daughter had died. And so they had buried her without her even being at the burial. This was really hard for her.' In fact, Marietou had made no mention in Wolof of people being 'scared' to tell her, nor did she speak of not being present at the burial (probably due to the fact that Muslim women in Senegal do not attend funerals). Marietou then began to speak again about 'the tradition,' when Melching interrupted, in a matter of fact tone, saying (in Wolof), 'now tell them what happened, what led to you doing something about it' (my translation from the Wolof).

Marietou then spoke of how with her subsequent daughters, she was 'not ready' to have them taken for the tradition. Melching explained that Marietou 'couldn't say to them, "I'm not going to take her, I don't believe in this", and that was mainly because she knew that if she said that her children wouldn't have a husband, that her daughters wouldn't get married.' Marietou began to

speak again when Melching instructed her, in Wolof, to start summing up. As Marietou continued to talk about her children, Melching reminded her (in Wolof), 'now you should talk about … it…' At this prompting, Marietou then began to speak in some detail of how (imam) Demba Diawara and Tostan came to the village to discuss why they should drop 'the tradition.' As Marietou paused, Melching turned to the anchor, Diane Sawyer, saying:

> So what happened was - and maybe I can just finish because… She was in the village and another village elder came to their village and told them that, they were all of the intermarrying family, and they very much wanted to talk to the whole village about ending this tradition because they knew of all the pain and suffering that the girls had gone through. And at first she said that she was against this because she wanted to show solidarity with the other women who were saying, 'oh no, we can't talk about this, we can't end this tradition.' The more he came and talked to them the more they realised, and the more the women started standing up and saying, we've had problems, we know that this is a problem. And what they did is they came together in an inter-village meeting, they all came together and discussed this together as a family, as an extended family. And there were 13 villages that came, and they all decided together to abandon this, and then they decided on February 14, 1998, they all stood up together and they said that we declare it will no longer be expected for our girls to do this. They will no longer have to go through this in order to find a husband. And this was the only way in which they could be sure they could stop this tradition in security.

Having taken over speaking at this point, for the remainder of the presentation, Melching gave an approximate translation of Marietou's remaining words, adding certain details and omitting others in this translation, carried out in a composed and confident tone. She finished by telling of 48 villages that had abandoned FGC because of the work of Marietou and her compatriots, and, looking at Marietou proudly, Melching began to clap, as the audience enthusiastically joined in, while Marietou sat impassively in silence. The presentation ended with Diane Sawyer requesting, 'tell me Molly, what they say, what she says at the end, as the… arms linked anthem.' Melching then proclaimed in a raised voice, 'The call to action of the women, especially those first women who stood up and abandoned on their own, they said the name of our call to action is *Jeykabeng! Jeykabeng! Jeykabeng*! Let us unite and decide. Let us end this once and for all, let us unite and decide.' Smiling, Melching repeated '*Jeykabeng*!' several times more in a triumphant voice, while Marietou sat beside her, expressionless, the former adding 'it's a Bambara word!' as the audience began to clap.

The pair's presentation was repeated a year after this event, on the occasion of the visit to the Tostan office in Dakar by the UK Minister for International Development. A donor in attendance subsequently posted online: 'Marietou outlined her story and told of her two daughters who died

from the practice. She spoke with such dignity and halfway through her testimony, she started to cry with the memory of the moment. I was sitting next to her and found my emotions hard to keep in check' (Orchid Project 2011). The Minister's approval of Marietou's story of 'FGC' abandonment prompted him to tell the Tostan participants, 'I see you as social evolutionaries' (ibid.).

Melching frequently tells the stories of her participants (either in their presence or absence) to international audiences, of which the event in New York described here is quite a typical example. Like most NGO leaders, she interacts with a broad range of stakeholders, and the example here of her interpretation of Marietou's story illuminates how she translates her beneficiaries' stories to external parties, also shedding some light on the ways in which she interacts with village participants she has known for many years. We can see from the translation transcribed here that the focus is on communicating a narrative meaningful to the audience, occasionally sacrificing an accurate translation of what Marietou actually says in the interests of this narrative, in an act of quasi-ventriloquism. Marietou's testimony is thus reframed using concepts and scenarios of consequence, and emotionally arresting, to the audience (such as the idea of a girl marrying at the age of 13, or a mother being unable to attend her child's funeral; the latter detail was one of a number of points not mentioned by Marietou herself, but which Melching added in her English translation). By shaping the story with the inclusion or omission of such details, and prompting Marietou if she goes off topic, Melching steers the narrative in a particular direction.

Indeed from the way Marietou herself tells the story it is evident that she is accustomed to telling it. As Harri Englund notes, 'recognition always entails a specific aesthetic, a particular form that claims – and the social relations that they delineate – must assume in order to be recognised' (Englund 2004: 10). During this performance, the purpose of the narrative constructed by Melching and Diarra's presentation is to ignite empathy and compassion for the unfortunate circumstances of the latter's life, painted as the result of superstition ('they told me that it was the spirits that had done it,') 'tradition' and social pressure ('she knew that if she said that, her children wouldn't have a husband, that her daughters wouldn't get married'). Marietou's story is otherwise decontextualised and depoliticised, and beginning with the mention of her age at marriage, to the telling of how her children were 'taken away' from her, through to how she finds out about their deaths, is told in a way that suggests abnormal coercion, cruelty and violation. Marietou is presented as an individual constructed and constituted by tragedy, or more

specifically, tragedy that can be turned into narrative. In the end, Melching, whose voice (as that of the authoritative translator) is the dominant one in the performance, ultimately silences Diarra by taking up her story and finishing it for her.

Underpinning these narratives is a key organisational preoccupation: that Tostan is represented externally as a grassroots-based ('participatory') movement whose programme engages fully with target communities. A Tostan brochure published in 2009 states that, 'Tostan has worked at the grassroots level with thousands of village communities in many African countries, learning from participants about their priorities, values, and hopes for the future' (Tostan 2009a). This emphasis is, I argue, key to the organisation's overall 'quest for legitimation,' a typical concern of many development NGOs that focus on rural communities (Hilhorst 2003: 218). This need for 'legitimation' is partly the result of the influence on development of critical and postcolonial theories of gender and personhood, of which Melching clearly demonstrates an awareness, e.g. the emphasis she places on her original reticence to tackle the subject of FGC when first faced with it due to her own 'tricky' position in this environment (Linsky 2010). Such understandings are exemplified in Wood's (2001: 429) observation that:

> Postmodern and postcolonial feminist theories applied to development have opposed universalizing and essentializing notions of a homogeneous 'Third World woman' assumed to need saving by first world experts […] From this perspective, alternative constructions of development require that we recognize the diverse experiences and 'listen to the previously silenced voices' of Third World women.

Listening to, or being seen to listen to, the previously silenced voices of local participants in development projects is now increasingly part of development orthodoxy, related to prevailing discourses of 'participation' and 'partnership' (see Eriksson Baaz 2005; Lewis 2001). These discourses are inherent to Tostan's image-making through its Director, who works to propagate the idea that the organisation practises 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' development. The legitimacy and 'bottom-up' image of Tostan's activities (i.e. the idea that local people are responsible for decision-making on issues such as FGC) is reinforced to external stakeholders by the attendance of participants like Marietou and the communication of her personal testimony at international events such as the conference described above. The inclusion of Marietou's voice is, I argue, Tostan's attempt to answer 'demands for authenticity from "native informants"' (Wood 2001: 429), with the aim of convincing donors of the value of its work. The orchestrated nature of Marietou's performance, evident in the iterative way she tells her story via emotive concepts meaningful to Western audiences, as well as the tears she cries at each telling, transmits a

carefully managed message in support of claims for the legitimacy and authenticity of Tostan's work.

This version of 'giving voice' to a local participant, with the aim of depicting an 'alternative construction of development' (Wood 2001: 429) on the part of the organisation, in fact risks reproducing Western feminist stereotypes of 'the average third world woman,' described by Mohanty (1984: 334) as follows:

> This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.

As Stuart Hall argued, 'representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated' (Hall 1997 in Madison 2005: 4). In this case, the representation of Marietou Diarra as a victim of tradition who overcomes her situation by accessing the superior knowledge offered by Tostan offers credibility to the organisation's activities. However, this simplistic representation is far from Marietou's lived reality, offering as it does a single decontexualised understanding of the life events she described. Hall adds that 'interpretation [holds] a great deal of power' (ibid.). Since all representations are themselves constructions, they 'reveal the agency of the account giver' (Hilhorst 2003: 223). In choosing to speak about and for Marietou's experience, Tostan's Director claims the power to define and reinforce the 'problem,' through narrative. Linda Alcoff's essay entitled *The Problem of Speaking for Others* explores the politics of who can speak for whom, an enduring question within feminist philosophical and activist thought (Alcoff 1991). Emphasising the importance of context (social spaces), Alcoff discusses 'the problem of representation' in terms of 'the mediated character of all representations':

> In both the practice of speaking for as well as the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*. I am representing them *as* such and such, or in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject-positions. This act of representation cannot be understood as founded on an act of discovery wherein I discover their true selves and then simply relate my discovery. I will take it as a given that such representations are in every case mediated and the product of interpretation (which is connected to the claim that a speaker's location has epistemic salience). (Alcoff 1991: 9, emphasis in original)

During the translation, Melching frequently interrupts and takes over Marietou's speech, preventing the latter from having the space to speak freely, even given the limitations inherent to the act of interpreting from one language to another. The implication is that Marietou's presence alone and the fact that she speaks at all (even in a limited manner), are sufficient in order to convey her story in an appropriate and authentic manner. As Alcoff notes, 'rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle' (Alcoff 1991: 15). Melching's decision to take over and summarise Marietou's story exemplifies a discursive arrangement wherein a 'well-meaning First World person is speaking for a person or group in the Third World,' thereby reinscribing the "hierarchy of civilizations" view where the United States lands squarely at the top' (ibid.: 26). In Melching and Marietou's case, this effect occurs because Melching as primary speaker is positioned as 'authoritative and empowered, as the knowledgeable subject, while the group in the Third World is reduced, merely because of the structure of the speaking practice, to an object and victim that must be championed' (ibid.). One effect of this discursive approach is to 'reinforce racist, imperialist conceptions and perhaps also to further silence the lesser-privileged group's own ability to speak and be heard' (ibid.).

Reactions to these presentations by Tostan's local actors ranged from the disinterested to the sceptical, particularly towards Marietou's story. Most of the Dakar and Thiès-based staff were aware of these occasional appearances by local participants at international events via the organisational intranet and email communications, or because of their associated logistical roles. Prevailing opinion viewed the presentations as theatricals by both Melching and Marietou (or the other project beneficiaries present), with one staff member describing it as 'Molly pinching the women to make them cry,' a characterisation that elicited much laughter from his colleagues. These urban-based local staff, many of whom had little experience of village life, expressed the view that the performances were carried out for personal benefit: for Marietou, to gain money and opportunity for advancement (they said); and for Melching, to gain prestige for herself and for Tostan; they understood the events as part of efforts to promote the organisation to donors and supporters.

Such a perspective tallies with the characterisation by Hilhorst (2003: 223) of NGO leaders such as Melching as 'brokers of meaning,' who 'negotiate relationships by convincing the other parties of the meaning of events, processes and needs and their own roles.' Additionally, I argue that Marietou Diarra herself is a 'broker of meaning,' as she negotiates the communication of her

identity in relation to the notions and expectations of Melching, and the audience. Working with Melching, she constructs a '"good representation" (that is, one that works and legitimates), a skilful improvisation that combines fragments of actual experiences and discourses with bits of knowledge about the party for whose sake it is delivered and enacted' (ibid.). Through these processes, Melching, in an effort illustrative of NGO leaders' attempts to seek 'legitimation' for their work, is able to 'persuade [her] counterparts in international arenas that [she is] knowledgeable and represents the ideas of [her] local clients' (ibid.: 218), and her discourse fabricates intelligible narratives out of snapshots of worlds distant to those of her audience.

## Concluding discussion

This chapter explored how Melching, as the Tostan Director, seeks legitimacy and support for project activities through the employment of a number of public narratives, acting with an understanding of the limits of knowledge/awareness of the perspectives of her interlocutors, especially audiences at global networking events. I thus argue that Melching is a 'broker of meaning' (Hilhorst 2003: 173) who strategically employs a range of narratives, depending on the audience. Cohen and Comaroff (1976: 88), writing about the management of meaning, conceptualise the broker as a political actor 'who seeks to make the other parties to brokerage relations - patrons and clients - dependent on his services.' Melching operates in diverse arenas and the representations that she makes depend on the network within which she is interacting. Her legitimacy and authority lie in the discursive repertoire she has built around her knowledge and experience of the 'local culture' and Wolof language in Senegal, as well as her 'translation' of the voices and experiences of Senegalese women, activities that cannot be detached from the trajectory of power.

The Tostan Director is skilled at identifying and gaining access to key conferences, maximising her media coverage and tailoring her discourse to the appropriate situation. In this she is supported by Tostan's Board of Directors, all of whom are elite professionals in the domains of business, philanthropy and academia. Melching's tailoring of her discourse to the appropriate milieu ranges from the way she deals with her local staff, to her collaboration with participant villagers, to her communications with external 'interpretive communities' whose financial and political support she wishes to secure for Tostan (Mosse 2005:8 ). Because she 'link[s] a variety of domains that, at most, partially overlap, [she has] a knowledge advantage over [her] stakeholders that advances [her] power' (Hilhorst 2003: 219). This bridging of different life

worlds is seen in the social 'partnerships' and representations that Melching maintains, revealing common themes of discourse and practice, and the exercise of power within the 'non-profit-industrial complex' (Rodríguez 2007: 21). This is exemplified in the Director's 'translation' activities (including her acts of literally translating the testimony of a programme participant accompanying her to international advocacy events), which rest on the fact that, 'because actors in different domains have only fragmented knowledge about one another, they rely on [her] representations to know what happens in the other domains' (Hilhorst 2003: 219).

Taking a decontextualised approach to communicating a village participant's story, Melching as 'translator' strategically relies on the perceived ignorance of her audience of the social context she is presenting, as well as their ignorance of the Wolof language, in which Marietou speaks. The narrative presented offers only a superficial, statistical view of its subject (Marietou); occasionally adding such detail when Marietou fails to mention it herself. The audience learns nothing else about other elements of Marietou's story, nor the form of or complex motivations for 'the tradition' in her village. Indeed 'the tradition' is portrayed as the primary, if not the only problem that Marietou faces. An alternative approach in attempting to tell Marietou's story within the development paradigm would be to contextualise her narrative, making her a political actor who is part of a larger political economy. Instead, emphasis is placed on the apparent evils of cultural 'traditions,' part of the 'depoliticising' logic characteristic of the development industry within which Tostan is embedded (Ferguson 2006).

In this regard, Melching's success lies in her ability as an 'interface expert' (Hilhorst 2003: 182), able to 'mobilise diverse resources (knowledge, affiliations, networks, financial resources etc.)' (Guilhot 2005: 11) in order to 'accommodate different agendas, and therefore to establish strong positions' (ibid.). In addition, her 'control over the interpretation of events' (Mosse 2005: 8), exemplified in the authority she exercises in presenting to global audiences all forms of customary female genital alteration practices in Africa as harmful and even life-threatening, is a form of control essential to establishing and maintaining Tostan's 'strong position.' Furthermore, as I have shown here, Melching's interactions with her staff support Hilhorst's suggestion that the strength of an NGO leader 'many not primarily lie in managing values *within* the NGO, but in presenting a believable and coherent organisation to observers and stakeholders' (2003: 174, emphasis in original).

As Guilhot (2005: 4) notes:

> NGOs have become crucial actors of globalisation. They have moved from subordinate and antagonistic positions to dominant positions in the global networks of power… [they] are now run like multinational firms, by professionals whose career trajectories perfectly illustrate the new complementarity between NGOs and international organisations.

At the same time as becoming major actors in global networks of power, 'community-based' NGOs such as Tostan must maintain their narrative as grassroots activist 'movements,' a narrative that is vital to preserving the authenticity and consequent legitimacy from which their power stems. Writing about development leaders, Mosse argues that in this way, they are 'able to exert influence only because the ideas or instructions they purvey can be translated into other people's own intentions, goals and ambitions' (Mosse 2005: 8). The delicate balancing act of maintaining this narrative across different spatial, political and social interfaces is carried out by Melching in her role as a broker of meaning who defines the 'problem' (e.g. 'female genital cutting') and its 'solution' (Tostan's Community Empowerment Program) and strategically employs narratives that reinforce both. Because a development programme is a moral and social project, as well as a political project, a key preoccupation of development leaders like Melching is the management of meaning through this constant legitimisation of project representations. Quoting Bruno Latour (1996: 86), Mosse observes that for projects, 'there's no inertia, no irreversibility; there is no autonomy to keep them alive': there is therefore no respite for leaders such as Melching from the work of 'creating interest and making real' (Mosse 2005: 172). Through her public discourses, Melching attempts to secure Tostan's immediate future and to imagine its longer-term existence. In response to the question 'what's the future?' posed to her in an interview with *Forbes* magazine (Koteles 2013), Melching stated:

> My long-term vision for Tostan is that we will be able to continue on with this educational work, we have millions and millions of women, girls who have been married at 12, who've had to leave school, but who do need basic education, they do need a programme on health, on literacy, on project management skills. I think that this kind of information needs to be spread. We can do it, other NGOs are working on it, and I think this has to spread across Africa, and other developing nations.

By exercising the power to define problems and needs (and problematic and needy groups of people, e.g. 'girls who have been married at 12… who need project management skills'), the deployment of such a narrative creates a vacuum, and straightaway presents the structure of non-governmental organisations (such as Tostan) as depoliticised vehicles of change to fill that vacuum, in a potentially never-ending loop of 'problems' and 'solutions.' As Agustín (2005) argues in her discussion of the emergence of philanthropic endeavours in 19th century Europe,

'the invention of socially problematic groups necessitated (and justified) the creation of a series of jobs for those who would carry out the defined social projects.' 'Problems' such as 'female genital cutting,' which in reality may or may not pose health risks depending on the form they take or how they are carried out, are political constructs within the 'development' context. In this chapter, I have attempted to show how, despite fragmentation and dissent, influential actors in this milieu, such as Tostan's Director, are 'constantly engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of *composition,*' Mosse (2005: 9, emphasis in original).

In the next chapter, I focus on the actions and experiences of another key group of actors within Tostan's social world: its volunteers.

# Chapter 6

## Transnational Knowledge Workers: Tostan's Volunteers

### Introduction

In public, Tostan discourse emphasises the fact that it is 'a 99% African organisation' (Population Reference Bureau 2009), i.e., that it is predominantly staffed by Africans. The vagueness of this figure notwithstanding, such statements point to the fact that a small (but significant) minority of the organisation is comprised of non-African expatriates.[44] During the period of my involvement with the organisation (2007-2011), these included the Director, the Head of Operations, and six of the seven-person Board of Directors, who were all nationals of the United States, Canada or Europe, alongside various programme managers, consultants, and researchers. Within Tostan, the group most identified with these kinds of expatriates however, was the volunteers; naturally enough, as the majority of them hailed from either the United States or Europe. I was a member of this group for a six-month period (September 2007 to March 2008); it was as an unpaid 'full-time independent intern' (the official title) that I gained entry to the organisation.[45]

Originally based at the *coordination nationale* in Thiès (the city where its founder had first established Tostan as an NGO), my initial perception of and experience with Tostan was from the perspective of a *volontaire*, a position that afforded me an emic view of the organisation as a 'privileged migrant' (Fechter 2007: 17). Returning to Tostan for a 15-month period in 2009 as a *chercheuse* (researcher), I found it relatively easy to slot back into the role of expatriate affiliate

[44] I follow Anne-Meike Fechter's understanding of the term 'expatriate,' in her ethnography of Euro-American expatriates in Indonesia: 'The term 'expatriate' is a loose one and has multiple meanings… [it] consists of the Latin ex ('out') and patria ('native country'), describing 'a person who lives outside their native country'… In spite of this rather broad meaning, the majority of contemporary migrants who leave their countries to live elsewhere are typically not referred to as expatriates. Instead, the term is conventionally reserved for Westerners who have lived abroad for varying lengths of time, especially artists, colonials, and generally those with a mission of one kind or another' (Fechter 2007: 1).

[45] Because the majority of the expatriates in Tostan (usually referred to colloquially by Senegalese and non-Senegalese in the organisation as *toubabs*) were volunteers, and most of the volunteers were expatriates, there was often a blurring of lines between these two categories; indeed newly hired *toubab* staff or consultants were often initially assumed by their Senegalese to be *volontaires*. Some volunteers in fact stayed on to become staff members, or returned to have other roles in the organisation, as was my own case.

of the organisation, and when not conducting fieldwork in a 'Tostan village' in Casamance, I was a participant observer at Tostan's headquarters in Dakar, engaging in the office routine of its staff and volunteers. Occasionally helping out with administrative tasks such as reports and translations, I also participated in meetings, trainings and other events at the office and elsewhere in the city (visiting a local women's prison, for example, on International Women's Day). I lodged at the volunteer accommodation in Dakar, sharing rooms, meals and stories with the inhabitants of the *maison des volontaires*. The population of this house was never constant, with a stream of volunteers, visitors and researchers such as myself arriving and departing on a weekly, or even daily, basis.

Given the relative heterogeneity of this group, almost all of whom were foreigners in Senegal, in this chapter I draw on Fechter's way of thinking about 'expatriates,' and approach the volunteers as a 'diverse group whose members yet have significant connections,' making reference to Marilyn Strathern's (2004) notion of 'partial connections' (Fechter 2007: 6). The concept of 'partial connections' enables discussion of such a heterogeneous cluster of people without assuming that they share a fixed set of 'group characteristics'; instead, 'the researcher can explore, and produce, meaningful connections between them' (ibid.). In this way, I do not conceptualise the volunteers as a single, bounded group, but instead highlight the commonalities of their backgrounds and experiences. I offer an ethnographic account that explores who they are, what they do, and why they choose to volunteer with Tostan, suggesting that they are part of what Ulf Hannerz refers to as a 'new class' of 'cosmopolitan connoisseurs' whose main characteristic is their 'decontextualised cultural capital' (Hannerz 1996: 105, 108).

Continuing my analysis of knowledge practices within the organisation, I explore the volunteers' understanding of 'culture' and the role it plays in how they conceive of life in Senegal, Tostan's work, and their own position in this milieu, a perception influenced by the cultural 'knowledge' imparted to them through the official orientation they receive on arrival with Tostan. Included in analysis of this cultural 'knowledge,' is an examination of associated questions such as why the NGO maintains its volunteer programme given the problems caused by the 'cultural clashes' that frequently occurred between the volunteers and their Senegalese colleagues (which, I argue, is partly the result of the 'revolving door' nature of the volunteer programme that saw groups of young foreigners with relatively little understanding of and commitment to life in Senegal thrust into the organisation for short periods of time). I discuss how the presence of the volunteers is alternately employed and (strategically) 'ignored' through the ambiguity of Tostan policy and

practice, in order to convey appropriate interpretations of its activities to a variety of stakeholders. I show how participation in the volunteer programme offers mutual benefits for both the volunteers and Tostan, despite, or perhaps because of, the limitations, ambiguities and prescriptions ascribed to their role within the organisation.

## 'In love with a country and a continent'

> The African Adventure begins. Stay tuned for photos, videos, anecdotes, and quotes from my time working in Dakar with Tostan.
>
> Blog post by Tostan volunteer, Samantha, January 2010

These were the opening words on a blog by 23-year-old Samantha, a new arrival in early 2010 to Senegal, about to start work as a volunteer intern with Tostan's communications department. This blog, which Samantha kept for the duration of her one-year 'service' with Tostan was, as promised in her initial post quoted above, filled with photos, stories and observations, mainly targeted at her friends and family at home in the United States. The tone of writing was lively, descriptive and enthusiastic, filled with an unabashed Pollyannaism, unquestioning confidence, and rather naïve excitement at the new 'adventure' ahead. Any discomfort or inconvenience related to the heat or electricity cuts were all part of the 'adventure' and indeed seemed key to making it such an adventure.

> 'Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you've imagined.' - - Thoreau'
> - From an e-mail my old boss in Oregon sent wishing me luck. Thank you everyone for your support- It means more to me than you could imagine. And thank you Thoreau- I will try to do just as you propose.
>
> Samantha blog post, January 2010

In the four days following her arrival, Samantha posted 17 photos on her beautifully laid out magazine-style blog, indicating some considerable skill in media journalism, and the appropriateness of her selection as an intern in Tostan's communications department. Each photo was accompanied by a caption, briefly and often humorously commenting on its subject. Most of the photos were snapshots of her immediate surroundings, such as the bedroom she shared in her new home at the 'volunteer house,' her new 'volunteer friends,' as she somewhat ironically put it,

having breakfast in the kitchen while posing with smiles for the camera, and the dusty street on her five-minute walk from the house to the Tostan office. The accompanying text cheerfully accentuated the physical challenges of her experience: the discomfort of flies that 'land on you everywhere and tickle,' the lack of toilet paper (including her realisation that 'there is actually a REASON why people DO NOT touch food with their left hands,') and her feet swollen from the heat. She concluded that the place was 'nothing like my non-expectations,' was 'polluted and busy,' and that the more she walked through the 'make-shift fruit stands and boutiques (what they call little food stores that are basically holes in the wall with stacks of dusty canned food stuffs and dirty old fridges),' the more they seemed 'real.' The exoticness and 'seductive quality of the dissimilar' (Frankland 2009: 95) she associated with this environment, as well as the omnipotent hallmarks of her conceptions of poverty, scarcity and lack of hygiene, were highlighted by Samantha in every detail.

Samantha's blog was to become somewhat notorious among Tostan Dakar staff and volunteers shortly afterwards, thanks to the following excerpt from her post on 'Day 4':

> I have already survived a number of situations that could have posed serious problems to my health.
> #1- a tuna sandwich on 50% (what they call half) of a baguette with butter from a boutique around the corner from the office building.
> #2- Ginger juice (my favorite juice) with un-filtered ice cubes that I didn't remove until after they had melted a bit.
> #3- a sip of cow's milk
> #4- brushing my teeth with the water from the tap.
> But I'm all good so far so I'll just keep crossing my fingers!
> Don't worry mom. :)
>
> Samantha blog post, January 2010

Because of this entry, within less than a week of her arrival and installation at the Tostan office, Samantha found her name vilified, with many of the Senegalese staff blatantly ignoring her, a huge insult in a context where taking the time for daily greetings and acts of mutual recognition were, on an individual level, considered at least as important in maintaining good work relations as effective execution of work duties. Many of the staff (some of whom had not actually read the offending blog post) were convinced that Samantha had deeply insulted Senegalese culture, mocking their food, water and standards of hygiene. I came to hear of this incident from a staff member who reported with some glee that a volunteer had burst into tears in the office because another member of staff had verbally attacked her about it. Having not read the piece yet myself,

I was naturally curious to.

The scandal had come about quite simply. Samantha's blog was a public one, with no password protection, available for anyone to read on the Internet. Tostan's communications team makes use of Google Alerts[46] to keep track of any references made to the organisation online, receiving daily email alerts triggered by the key word 'tostan.' Thus, Samantha's blog, which referred to Tostan by name, had made its way into the email inbox of the communications team and quickly spread to other staff inboxes across the organisation, as its notoriety grew. She was, in fact, in violation of her agreement with Tostan in having referred to it by name on a public webpage. Keenly concerned with its public and international image, the organisation lays down guidelines on the matter for its volunteers and explains this rule during their orientation, as well as its claim to ownership of all text and photos produced by volunteers for the duration of their 'service.'

The outrage caused sprung from the idea that Samantha seemed to find the food and drink in Dakar repulsive and dangerous, so much so that the idea of brushing her teeth using tap water appeared to be an act of great risk and bravery. Before reading the excerpt myself (Samantha made the blog password-protected shortly afterwards), I was under the impression from office staff that this American girl had come to the country, full of disdain and contemptuous preconceptions about the horrific living conditions she would find here. I assumed that I would surely dislike such a person, were I to meet her (in the two years I had hitherto spent in Senegal, I had in fact met many foreigners, including long-term residents, who held such opinions about the country and its inhabitants). However, closer analysis of the piece, and subsequent encounters with Samantha herself, indicated that she was writing more or less tongue-in-cheek, and certainly did not mean to offend. In addition, she had not expected her words to be read by her Senegalese colleagues, with the audience for the blog obviously being her American family and friends. Samantha wrote to inform and entertain her American audience, to help them to see Senegal, the site of her exotic African adventure, through her eyes, using mutually intelligible and recognisable language and images. However, despite her intention not to offend, her words had been interpreted as offensive by her Senegalese readers, who were no doubt impacted by English language limitations that likely inhibited them from detecting the fairly ironic tone of the piece. In

[46] As described on the Google Alerts webpage (http://www.google.com/alerts, accessed 14 September 2011), the service offers 'email updates of the latest relevant Google results (web, news, etc.) based on your choice of query or topic,' including, 'monitoring a developing news story [and] keeping current on a competitor or industry,' etc.

any event, although she meant no offence, and indeed displayed an open-minded 'try anything' attitude when it came to food, travel, and other aspects of her experience (reminiscent of Hannerz's [1996: 105] 'cosmopolitan connoisseurs… affluent and open-minded,' who feel free to engage or disengage in local scenarios and add or delete parts of 'other cultures' from their personal repertoire at their choice) it is clear that Samantha was indeed reproducing the trope of Africa as a place full of potential danger, the 'heart of darkness' image so beloved of the colonial era.

The context is important here. The Senegalese staff were not humourless, aggressive or spiteful, nor was Samantha simply a naïve, privileged and ignorant holidaymaker, even if these are the representations of each other that I often discerned from conversations with staff and volunteers. I use this event as a lens through which to introduce the idea of the different worlds and world-views that meet in a setting such as that of this NGO, Senegalese in name, but American in management and ethos, with the vast majority of its African staff greeting and bidding farewell to a constant stream of (mostly female, American, middle-class) volunteers coming and going in a revolving door-type system. This story was not atypical and from my earliest involvement with Tostan in Senegal in 2007, I had experienced, witnessed or heard of numerous such tales of misunderstanding between staff and volunteers, often with longer-term repercussions, as the following anecdote illustrates.

### *Jaay fondé* trouble

Coming to Senegal as a volunteer with Tostan in September 2007, in quite a similar fashion to Samantha, I had arrived with my own 'non-expectations,' interested in learning about an organisation thought to be an innovator in behaviour change regarding FGC. I'd had no prior experience working with NGOs, and I was interested in viewing the so-called reality of the Tostan intervention. On being accepted as a 'volunteer intern,' I was assigned to the city of Thiès, and lodged at the *maison des volontaires* along with a constantly changing (and at the time female-only) population of fellow volunteers. For quite some time, I was the only non-American in the house, apart from one Togolese staff member, who usually retired to her bedroom on returning from work each evening and rarely interacted with the other residents.

I vividly recall my first day at the office, as I, along with three other new *volontaires*, was ushered in by the Volunteer Coordinator, an American, to meet the staff. I was surprised by the

coldness of the staff, most of whom barely looked up from their work to greet us, as we, full of smiles and enthusiasm, knocked on each office door to introduce ourselves. This was not what I had been expecting, nor did it reflect the famous (if overused and clichéd idea of) Senegalese *teraanga* (hospitality) I had read about in the Tostan Volunteer Orientation Handbook. Over the following weeks, I found it quite difficult to interact in almost any way with most of the staff in the Thiès office, as even a simple request for routine information was often met with blank stares, shrugs or gruff responses.

Six weeks later, I learned the reason for this rather mysterious contrariness. By now, I had been sent 'on mission' to the Tostan regional office in Ourossogui, in the north-eastern desert region of Fouta. My vaguely defined 'mission' was to visit several villages in the region - which I learned on arrival were inhabited by Fulani Mauritanian refugees - and speak to the people I met there (even though I did not speak Fulani and they did not speak French) in order to write a 'village portrait' report for one of the donors. I was to spend around two weeks in Fouta, staying at the office *chambre de passage* and taking day trips to the villages. I had travelled to Ourossogui unaccompanied by *sept place* public transport, but on arrival I found three staff members from Thiès already staying there, on a separate microcredit 'mission.' I knew them only by name, having had next to no interaction with them back in Thiès. I ended up befriending one of them, Aly, a young finance trainee from the Thiès office. He and I were usually left to our own devices after work hours while the older staff members visited relatives or 'reposed' in their rooms after the hot days in the desert town. Although I had never spoken to him before, Aly and I spent most evenings walking around the dimly lit, sandy streets of Ourossogui, chatting about this and that. Now that I had escaped the *toubab* 'bubble' of the volunteer existence in Thiès, I was pleased to get to know Aly, a Fulani who had been born in Fouta and educated in Dakar.

One evening, after a day spent in a nearby village, where I had been deposited without an interpreter to 'interview' Mauritanian refugee women (this had in fact turned out to be a rather pleasant day of playing with children as the women kindly fed me and delighted in my admiration of their crocheting skills), Aly and I were seated on woven mats in the dusty courtyard in front of the office building, which doubled as a residence for those 'on mission.' Their was a power outage and the moonlit courtyard was brighter and cooler than indoors, and so we sat outside drinking *attaaya* with the guard as the crickets and mosquitoes buzzed around us. I took the opportunity to ask Aly why he never spoke to me, or any of the other volunteers, while we were in Thiès. He replied simply, 'we were told not to.' Surprised, I asked him why. He then told me

the story of an American volunteer named Melanie, who had left Tostan a couple of months previously. During the annual retreat (when the entire national and international staff assemble in Thiès), Melanie had stood up, and complained about sexual harassment. She said that she was tired of enduring the Thiès staff's comments on her appearance, in particular her apparently well-endowed derrière (her *jaay fondé*,[47] as Aly gleefully put it); she denounced this as 'sexual harassment,' and promptly burst into tears. This speech was met with a shocked and embarrassed silence. The fact that Melanie's pronouncement had been made in public and the subject had been raised in such a manner caused quite a stir. According to Aly, the Deputy Executive Director of the organisation, (and husband of the founder and Director), subsequently assembled the Thiès-based staff separately and advised them to limit their interactions with volunteers from now on: to effectively not speak to them, in order to avoid this kind of problem arising again. Naturally, this story came as something of a revelation to me at the time, explaining the gruffness and distance of the Senegalese staff's attitude towards the volunteers in Thiès.

These two anecdotes serve as illustration of the potential conflicts and contested ideas of behaviour on the part of volunteers and local staff members, within the sites of culture and power at the heart of the organisation. A closer look at the volunteers themselves and their role is necessary at this point.

## Who are *les volontaires*?

Perhaps inspired by the fact that its founder is a former volunteer (Molly Melching became a US Peace Corps volunteer in a village in the Thiès region after her first experience in Dakar as an exchange student), the official conception of the volunteer programme, as reflected in Tostan's own texts, is infused with a rhetoric of idealism, enthusiasm and altruism. The 2008 Volunteer Orientation Handbook quotes American naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, informing readers that 'one is not born into the world to do everything but to do something,' while reminding them of Harriet Naylor's[48] assertion that: 'Volunteering can be an exciting,

[47] In Wolof, *jaay* means 'to sell' and *fondé* is a type of sweet millet porridge, often sold by women street sellers. The tern *jaay fondé* is usually used as a compliment to refer to an attractively curvaceous and ample female derrière, the idea being that the woman selling the *fondé* is apt to be her own best customer, hence her much-appreciated ample curves.

[48] Harriet Naylor was National Director of the Office of Volunteer Development at what was then the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) in the 1970s.

growing, enjoyable experience. It is truly gratifying to serve a cause, practice one's ideals, work with people, solve problems, see benefits, and know one had a hand in them.'[49]

Tostan's 'Africa Volunteer Program' is unidirectional, i.e. the flow of volunteers is one-way, although there also exists a 'Washington D.C. Internship Program,' which accepts locally-based volunteers to work at the small office there, in addition to the international programme discussed here. Tostan's official website (in English only until 2014, an indication of the site's target audience) outlines the general volunteer profile sought by the organisation – someone with a preferably high level of formal education (no specific area of training or expertise is specified), who does not necessarily possess any previous professional experience (Tostan 2012c):

> With a minimum stay of one year and the possibility to intern for two years or more, the Africa Volunteer Program is a great way to gain experience in a rapidly expanding organisation while working to empower communities across Africa. Tostan encourages applicants, 18 years and older, from anywhere in the world, to apply. College/university students, recent graduates, Master's, and Ph.D. candidates are especially welcome. Placements are full-time, unpaid, and competitive.

Drawing on Nancy Cook's 'facets of subjectivity' (Cook 2005: 365) schema used to describe her volunteer informants, I include age, nationality, sex, and level of formal schooling inter alia to introduce the volunteers I encountered during my fieldwork with Tostan (myself included). With some exceptions, most of Tostan's volunteers were in their early to mid-twenties. As most of the applicants are female, the vast majority of the volunteers are female (one volunteer, Nicole, laconically commented that this was because 'development is full of women').[50] Over the period of my experience with the NGO (2007-2011), I encountered a total of 73 volunteers, of whom 66 were female and 7 were male. The majority of them hailed from the United States. Although there was some variation in nationality (I encountered volunteers from a total of 17 different countries)[51], the overwhelming majority of volunteers were White North Americans or

[49] 'Inspirational' quotes or proverbs of this kind were popular among both the Senegalese and expatriate members of the organisation, with people including them as email signatures, or Skype tags (all office-based Tostan members are required to be logged on to Skype during business hours to be available for communication).

[50] For more on this see Barbara Heron's *Desire for Development* (2007), which offers an insightful exploration of the phenomenon of women development workers and their 'helping imperative' which she describes as 'white/Northern women's desire for other people's development' (Heron 2007: 6).

[51] The breakdown, from a total of 73, was as follows: USA (46), France (5), UK (4), Canada (3), Austria (2), Sweden (2), Ghana (1), Kenya (1), Senegal (1), Argentina (1), Ireland (1), Australia (1), Switzerland (1), Costa Rica (1), Finland (1), Italy (1), Guinea-Bissau (1).

Europeans, with fairly limited self-identified 'diversity.' Of the 73 volunteers I encountered, only 4 were African nationals (from Senegal, Ghana, Kenya and Guinea-Bissau) and each of these had been educated in either the United States or Europe.

All but one of the volunteers was university-educated (the exception was an 18-year-old British volunteer on a 'gap year'; some of the volunteers were in the middle of their undergraduate degree and earned 'college credit' through their time volunteering with Tostan); many of them held Master's degrees. Many were alumni of exclusive institutions such as the American University of Paris, Columbia University and the School for International Training. Most tended to have educational qualifications in the humanities and social sciences in subjects such as International Development, African Studies, French, Political Science, Education, Gender Studies, Global Communications, International Relations and Public Health. Few of the volunteers had professional work experience, the exception being the occasional professional (e.g. a nurse or an accountant) on leave from their permanent jobs; a handful of the volunteers were ex-Peace Corps, and had already had several years' experience in the region. Many of the Anglophones were self-confessed Francophiles or had at least studied the French language previously, and this was a reason cited by many behind their choice to volunteer in Francophone West Africa. Many of these hoped to improve their French language skills through the experience and indeed the French language competence of the volunteers varied considerably on arrival. In addition, apart from basic Wolof and Arabic greetings, most did not come to master a Senegalese language.

The duration of individual volunteer 'service' ranged from a few months to a year, and occasionally longer. Volunteers tended to be financially supported by their families (often a continuation of their university experience), or subsisted on savings or loans, while some had philanthropic foundation or government funding (e.g. Fulbright or Ford Foundation scholarships). In addition to the free accommodation provided to all volunteers, many also received 'stipends' from Tostan, largely on an individually negotiated basis, although this policy was not transparent at the time of my research. These stipends often amounted to a monthly wage higher than that of some of their permanent staff colleagues, and certainly surpassed the wages received by the village-based facilitators, as well as drivers, security guards and cleaners (most of whom were retained on casual work contracts as 'consultants,' in order to avoid the requirement to provide health cover and other employment benefits; I discuss these issues in greater detail in Chapter 7). The existence of volunteer stipends (despite the official statement that the positions were unpaid),

as well as free housing and extra holidays (volunteers and American expatriate staff at Tostan do not work on American public holidays whereas the rest of the staff do), occasioned some disgruntlement among the local, permanent staff.

## 'Giving back': the volunteer *Weltanschauung*

Most (but not all) volunteers tended to express a largely uncritical commitment to the notion of 'development' (i.e., externally funded and organised development projects as a solution to poverty and social problems), even as they experienced what they often found to be the frustrating reality of 'doing development' (Simpson 2004). The majority of them were office-based in their duties (even those posted to regional centres) and rarely tended to learn much about Tostan's Community Empowerment Program and its implementation in practice, apart from the social norms theory behind it, or the experience of an occasional 'mission' to 'the field.' Although often cynical of the inefficiencies they encountered at every level across the organisation in their daily office-based interactions, most seemed to assume that the village-based component was as successful as the stream of public relations-focused reports that they read, wrote and edited on a daily basis indicated, and rarely questioned whether or not the work they were involved in was of real benefit to target groups.

Stated motivations to volunteer with Tostan ranged from the confident idealism of the 'I want to make the world a better place' type (especially regarding the perception of African women as 'oppressed,' epitomised in the infamous practice of 'FGC'); to having 'roots' in Africa (usually African-American volunteers); a sense of wanting to 'give back' either for secular/cultural or religious reasons; an interest in French language/culture and Senegal's association with this; a desire for adventure or escape; and for career advancement purposes, inter alia.

At various times the volunteer corpus was peopled with individuals who talked about their move to Senegal in terms of 'love,' such as Samantha's profession to be 'in love with a country and a continent,' determined to smile broadly in Candidesque fashion through all the challenges she faced. 'I am a little pencil in the hand of a God who is writing a love letter to the world,' was a quote from Mother Teresa displayed prominently by another volunteer, Charlotte, as her email 'sig' (signature). Majid Rahnema, writing critically about the development phenomenon, refers to the 'masks of love' to which development workers can become addicted, arguing that 'development has incarnated a false love for an abstract humanity,' rather than for real people with their own singularities, perceptions and agency (Rahnema 1997: 392-3). 'Love'-inspired

motivation to 'change the world,' were public assertions made by some of the volunteers, related to an altruistic idea of 'giving back' which, I argue, stems from a contemporary form of *noblesse oblige*, or present-day missionary impulse (see Stirrat 2008).

This perspective tended to perpetuate stereotypes by producing simplistic physical and conceptual geographic boundaries, and poverty became detached as a definer of difference. Writing about British 'gap-year' volunteers abroad, Kate Simpson argues that understandings such as these inadvertently strengthen instead of challenge the holders' stereotypical perceptions of the 'Other' and instead focus on a depoliticised discourse of luck to rationalise their position in the world (Simpson 2004: 686). Many volunteers focused on their own position rather than that of their interlocutors, using what Quinby (2002) refers to as 'lotto logic' to make sense of the disparities they observed; accepting that it was simply 'luck' or even 'blessing' which saw them born into particular conditions, thereby prompting them to feel the need to 'give back.' These themes of 'morality, planetary consciousness, and a sense of entitlement and obligation to intervene elsewhere' (Heron 2007: 22) are illustrated in an article written by volunteer Charlotte in 2011 to promote the Tostan volunteer programme where she writes of her 'duty' (while simultaneously indicating how her future career prospects have been advanced by the 'sacrifice' she has made):

> I am so grateful that Tostan has allowed me to *give back* in a positive way to the nation that has been so formative in my life. Volunteering, for me, means giving my time, skills, and *love to make the world a happier place***.** It means *making a sacrifice* for the *betterment of others.* Field experience, and the learned skills that result... for me, the experience was an important step in deciding exactly what kind of development work I'd like to pursue**.**
>
> Thanks to my experience in Senegal, most specifically my time with villagers in rural areas, I plan on pursuing a career focused on international education. My parents raised me with a very strong work ethic, instilling in me a great reverence for academics and teaching me that education is the surest path to success, happiness, stability, and social responsibility. I recognize that most children are not as *lucky*, and I am grateful to have been so *blessed.* I consider it *my duty and my choice* to make the same educational opportunities available to every child.
>
> I have gained, from my experience, an *even deeper love of Senegal* - if that's possible - a great respect for and pride in the many colleagues I had the pleasure of working with, and a desire to spread Tostan's values of human rights through my future work in other countries. (Tostan 2010e, emphasis added)

Barbara Heron notes that 'development work still is, as it has been from its inception, axiomatically assumed to be altruistic' (Heron 2007: 2) and argues that 'bourgeois feminine subjectivity appeared to be best constituted by the "good" that was done while on long-term

placement in Africa' (ibid: 116). One way of considering the volunteer 'identity' or sense of 'self' and understanding of the world through ideas of 'self-growth' and 'giving back' as in Charlotte's narrative, is described by Heron as 'the humanist idea of a core or essence to which other qualities are added later' (2007: 11-12). In this schema, 'I' is the 'center from which a person look[s] out upon, and act[s] upon the world'…. in this accounting and self-description, then, storylines or narratives are central, and comprise a technology of self (in Foucauldian terms), since they are the means by which we internalize to ourselves, and comply with, the meanings that circulate in discourse' (ibid.).

Exemplified in Charlotte's narrative, many of the volunteers consciously or not reiterate the development ideology that anchors poverty and social problems (as identified and defined within the same discourse) within a depoliticised framework of ignorance, particularly ignorance of human rights doctrine. The implicit (and often explicit) assumption is that these problems can be solved via altruistically motivated actions of 'giving back' by those 'blessed' by an accident of birth. These narratives are located firmly within a (predominantly North American) culturally and class-specific notion of the intrinsic goodness of the act of volunteering (Heron 1999, 2007). This notion is embodied in Tostan's Executive Director, an ex-Peace Corps volunteer who 'visited Africa in 1974 [and] never left' once she realised that there were 'issues she could address, and she dedicated the next 20-plus years of her life to doing so' (Linsky 2010). As Sara de Jong argues, these ideas exhibit a modern form of *noblesse oblige*, 'the idea that privilege entails responsibility for the welfare of others' (de Jong 2011: 29). Illustrative of this idea is Ivan Illich's critical speech in 1968 about US volunteers in Mexico, entitled *To Hell With Good Intentions*, in which he described them as being:

> […] ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middle-class 'American Way of Life' […] A group like this could not have developed unless a mood in the United States had supported it - the belief that any true American must share God's blessings with his poorer fellow men. The idea that every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it. (Illich 1968)

## Cultural capital and the reinforcement of networks of privilege

Exemplifying this argument, Charlotte, who subsequently went on to work for the influential 'think tank,' Freedom House, in Washington, D.C., demonstrated this philosophy on her

Facebook page with a prominently displayed quote by hotel magnate Conrad Hilton:[52]

> There is a natural law, a Divine law, that obliges you and me to relieve the suffering, the distressed and the destitute. Charity is a supreme virtue, and the great channel through which the mercy of God is passed on to mankind. It is the virtue that unites men and inspires their noblest efforts.

De Jong notes that whereas the idea of this law (Divine or otherwise), that privilege entails a responsibility for the welfare of others, may be understood as 'classically altruistic,' the opportunity to undertake and lead this kind of activity is not only reliant on a certain privilege, but also lends itself to the reinforcement of privilege (de Jong 2011: 29). Marx and Engels' observation about the 'part of the bourgeoisie desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society' is applicable: within this group, they find 'the economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organisers of charity, members of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, temperance fanatics, hole-and-corner reformers of every imaginable kind' (Marx and Engels 1948 [1848]: 38). In a structurally unequal world, the personal gains, power relations, opportunities and privileges involved can be invisible to or (consciously or unconsciously) ignored by those embedded in the performance of these 'altruistic' activities. In a video interview with Samantha to promote Tostan to prospective volunteers, she outlines her thoughts about the 'sacrifice' involved in volunteering for a year:

> I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a sacrifice… but I would do it again. I basically just worked for a summer, raised money, and took that money and went, and went with it. And I'm about to do that again.

Samantha portrayed her decision to volunteer in Senegal as a sacrifice, but a worthwhile one that she wished to repeat (indeed she followed on her experience in Senegal with a trip to India to volunteer with an NGO practising 'development through dance'). In the same interview she goes on to describe her volunteering experience with Tostan in the following terms:

> It is so worth it, it is absolutely so worth it… my biggest advice is, decide, know that's what you want to do, feel passion for that, and then just go for it! I say, just go for it.

The reinforcement of networks of privilege is a key feature of the volunteering phenomenon in general, and the Tostan case in particular, which sees the production of a global alumnus of

[52] In 2007, Tostan was the recipient of the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize of one million dollars, for 'empowering women and communities in Africa to transform their lives.'

highly mobile, cosmopolitan individuals, emerging from an increasingly media-based and technology-rich culture. Selected by Tostan primarily for their possession of what Bourdieu refers to as 'cultural capital' (1986: 47), especially of the institutionalised kind (i.e. their association with elite educational institutions), the volunteers augment both their cultural *and* social capital through their experience with Tostan. As budding (or sometimes fully fledged) expatriate professionals, the volunteers gain a 'decontextualized knowledge [that] can be quickly and shiftingly recontextualized in a series of different settings' (Hannerz 1996: 108, writing about 'the new class' of cosmopolitan connoisseurs). Through the networks that they develop among themselves, as well as with the individuals and institutions they interface with (in person and virtually), in their role with Tostan, the volunteers have the opportunity to augment their cultural capital in all three senses outlined by Bourdieu (1986: 47).

Firstly, in the *embodied* state (ibid.: 48): for example, through the mastery of foreign languages such as French (or English for non-Anglophones), their mastery of the international language of development industry elites, and their mastery or at least minimal knowledge of an African language (thereby enhancing the perceived legitimacy and authenticity of their 'on the ground' experience of development). Secondly, cultural capital in the *objectified* state (ibid.: 50), through the acquisition of local ('African') clothing, jewellery, furniture, and *objets d'art* etc.; and finally in the *institutionalised* state (ibid.) through their affiliation with a globally recognised development organisation. For most of the volunteers the acquisition of such forms of cultural capital translated into a direct increase in their economic and social capital in the longer term, with a significant number of them going on to establish professional careers in 'international development' with larger NGOs and UN bodies, or with other internationally oriented institutions, at home and abroad. Using the experience and contacts gained from their time with Tostan (which I argue, translated into different forms of capital in Bourdieu's sense), they developed their career prospects by taking advantage of the social and economic opportunities that this opened up for them, through acts that Jurgen de Wispelaere characterises as 'appear[ing] altruistic while in fact being motivated by an "enlightened" form of self-interest' (de Wispelaere 2004: 12, discussing the ethics of altruism). For example, in the same series of video interviews, 22-year old Natalie (a volunteer in 2010-2011) had the following to say about her time with Tostan:

> So working with Tostan in Senegal, I really got to get my hands into development work, and this really helped me decide that this was something I wanted to do in the future… Life in rural Senegal really opened my eyes and I think will really help me in the future with the work that I will be doing.

Natalie described the benefits of her experience as follows:

> I realised that six months would not be enough time to get the cultural and professional experience I was looking for and so I extended for another six months…. I would say that the professional experience that I got was definitely invaluable. I got to figure out if development work was what I wanted to do for my career, and I think that was one of the most valuable things.

Thanks to their experience with Tostan, volunteers gained highly valued 'cultural and professional experience' with a respected human rights NGO based in West Africa. In some cases, this facilitated their entry into competitive graduate degree programmes, as was the situation for Natalie (above), whose economic capital (through her family situation) combined with her enhanced social and cultural capital, enabled her entry onto a Master's degree programme at an elite university following her year spent in Dakar with Tostan. Another volunteer, Riley, noted rather humorously in her blog that among the things she had learned during her time as a regional volunteer with Tostan were:

> […] how to shower with a bucket and a plastic cup, how to greet people in three different West African languages, how to write a report for the UN, how to cook a vegetable that tastes like a sweet potato but doesn't look like one.

Benefits accrued from the act of volunteering are clearly diverse, both for the volunteers and for Tostan itself. I now turn to the work that the volunteers undertake, analysing how this benefits the organisation, and exploring the ways in which the presence of the volunteers and their work may be rendered alternately invisible and visible through strategies of organisational ignorance.

## Transnational 'knowledge work': ambiguous, ignored… essential?

Like many of the volunteers, prior to my arrival in Senegal, my prospective role and duties with Tostan were largely unknown to me. Indeed, I was a little surprised to be quickly accepted as a volunteer following my application as I was not sure what skills I could bring to a development organisation in Africa: I had hitherto worked for three years as an English language teacher in Japan, and in a range of administrative roles in Australia, as well as at part-time casual jobs between and during my undergraduate and graduate degrees (as explained in the introduction to this thesis, I had applied to volunteer with Tostan in advance of pursuing a PhD in anthropology in order to learn more about the organisation, which at the time I was considering as a possible subject of research). My personal association with 'development' work in Africa until then had been stories of neighbours in Ireland (where I'd grown up), trained nurses or mechanics, who had taken a year off from their careers to do so-called 'good work' in Africa, usually with religious or

charitable organisations. In light of my lack of the 'concrete' skills I had until then associated with such work, I was a little surprised to discover that I was in fact a typical or even ideal candidate to volunteer with Tostan, as I show below.

The official volunteer mission, from the Tostan intranet site, accessed in 2010, is described as follows:

> To realize the potential of international volunteers to support and strengthen the capacity of local development workers;
> To recognize Tostan's potential as a host organisation for outstanding volunteers, to facilitate their learning about approaches to community development for human dignity, and to give them the opportunity to live, work and learn in a multilingual, motivational environment.

This mission statement indicates that predicted benefits may weigh more in favour of the volunteer participants themselves (e.g., the opportunity to live in a multilingual environment) than programme beneficiaries, say, and is replete with the vague terminology commonly found within NGO parlance, such as 'capacity-strengthening' and 'facilitation.'

Most of the volunteers are based in cities, either at the Tostan international office in the capital, Dakar, or the national *coordination* in Thiès. A minority of the volunteers are placed in regional *coordinations* in Senegal or at national *coordinations* in neighbouring countries to which Tostan has expanded its activities, such as Mali, The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. All receive their official 'orientation' in Senegal. In practice, and to the disappointment and frustration of many of those wishing to 'discover Africa,' most of the volunteers find themselves occupied for the duration of their time with Tostan in front of computer screens at what they consider to be mundane office work (similar to the development worker 'desk jockeys' described by Fechter and Hindman [2011: 1], 'completing vast reams of paperwork'). This work largely consists of administrative tasks such as filing and organising documents, drafting donor reports, drawing up funding proposals, writing brochures, translating documents, and updating the numerous social media websites that Tostan uses to promote its activities (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and Blogspot). Some of the volunteers have particular roles such as assistant to the Executive Director or the National Coordinator. Most have the chance to go at least once 'on mission to the field' (i.e. to visit a regional office or village where the programme is implemented), often to report on a high profile event such as a community declaration or to write a village or individual portrait for a press release or donor report. Regional volunteers have similar duties to the urban-based volunteers, albeit augmented by occasional 'capacity-building' activities such as computer and

language training for the local staff whom they sometimes accompany on field visits to target villages. Many of the volunteers find themselves with plenty of time on their hands during the work day, particularly in regional offices, where the role of the volunteer is often particularly vague and undefined, and boredom and frustration with unproductive and seemingly futile daily routines was commonplace.

The volunteers are usually supervised by a member of staff in the department in which they are placed, as well as by the Volunteer Coordinator (technically a volunteer her/himself, albeit in receipt of a monthly stipend). The latter is responsible for selecting and interviewing (via Skype) the volunteers, as well as their subsequent 'orientation' on arrival. During the period of my research, there was a high turnover in this position (a common feature throughout the organisation, with staff and volunteers constantly reassigned to shifting roles and locations), which, during my fieldwork, was always occupied by an American (at the time of my departure, the role was held by the daughter of the founder and Director).

The position of the volunteers in the overall structure of the organisation is ambiguous and occasionally contradictory. Despite the quite significant work done by many of the volunteers (e.g., writing the annual report), the volunteers were not included in the Tostan '*organigramme'* (organisational chart) during the years of my involvement with the organisation (see Appendix A), although they did feature in a version from 2006 where they were shown to occupy positions such as assistant to the National Coordinator. This later omission of the volunteer corpus reflects the ambiguity of their role within the organisation, particularly on the part of the management, perhaps indicating a reluctance to acknowledge the permanent presence of its (overwhelmingly Euro-American) volunteers, vis-à-vis different stakeholders. The erasure of the volunteers from the organisational chart offers support, I argue, for the image of Tostan as an overwhelmingly 'African' organisation (Population Reference Bureau 2009).

Although the volunteers are not officially and colloquially considered to be 'staff' in any event (i.e., they are not classified as salaried staff members), there were numerous other ways in which their presence and activities were officially played down, depending on the situation and audience. The smiling *toubab* faces of volunteers only appear on official web pages and other media when directly related to the volunteer programme itself. Tostan's carefully constructed and maintained public image is built on the idea that it is a grassroots social movement, a facilitator for the 'women of Senegal,' in particular, to 'direct their own development' and become 'empowered' (Tostan 2011b). In an attempt to avoid charges of cultural imperialism, Tostan's

official narrative communicates the idea that, particularly in relation to FGC, this is no outsider intervention, but a locally driven social movement. In this context, the presence of foreigners in the organisation is therefore officially kept to a minimum.

However, depending on the context, the official narrative changes as media output positions it as a 'volunteer-driven organisation' (Aid for Africa 2011). Indeed, considerable financial and human resources are devoted to its volunteer operation, which in turn provides an important source of relatively low-cost, if rather irregular-quality administrative and communications services. When communicating with potential and current volunteers, as well with media outlets promoting volunteering opportunities, Tostan advertises vacancies that seek 'motivated individuals' who wish to 'reach out' to form new partnerships with 'donors and partners':

> Volunteers do incredible work in all areas. It is thanks to volunteers that we were able to complete an exceptionally rigorous proposal for Spanish donors. Another volunteer, after having remarked similar weakness in many different reports, created a report outline, keeping in mind especially information newly demanded by funders, which will help the staff to improve your report. A current volunteer has just organized and made accessible more than 200 documents that were, until then, lost and confused in e-mail. A volunteer from the MERL Department (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, Learning) has played an important role in the analysis and improvement of our monitoring and evaluation tools. Our colorful and informative Annual Reports is the work of volunteers. Volunteers help us present the organisation in a more professional, complete and motivating manner, to other organisations, potential partners, and funders. They help enormously in planning and facilitating capacity-building activities for staff, especially in the field of information and communications technology. (Tostan Intranet 2011)

Given both the official and day-to-day ambiguity within the organisation towards the visible presence of the volunteers, an ambiguity also directed towards their roles and perceived usefulness (many of the regional staff in particular had no idea what the role of particular volunteers they worked with actually was, for example), I came to query why exactly Tostan maintained a volunteer programme, and indeed invested quite a lot of time and money into it, instead of establishing permanent, paid positions to carry out the volunteer activities. It struck me at the time as rather inefficient to invest resources in individuals who would almost certainly never be motivated to stay on with the organisation (due to lack of a 'real' salary and long-term career prospects, etc.). The idea seemed even more contradictory, given the problems constantly cropping up within the organisation due to the apparent cultural misunderstandings (such as Samantha's and Melanie's, above) that resulted from the constant stream of new arrivals and the personal difficulties they sometimes encountered in adjusting to a new environment, difficulties that affected themselves and their local colleagues, often very negatively.

I also wondered about the efficiency of a system that did not seem to offer much consistency in terms of skills and organisational knowledge. How could an organisation function well when it had such a short-term and varied workforce that varied dramatically from month to month, the constantly changing nature of whose corpus required permanent 'orientation' and adaptation to the organisational system, and the local environment? How could such a workforce be really useful or offer any consistent benefit to the organisation's stated aims, and if it was not really beneficial, then why was it maintained? In answer to my query about this, an ex-Volunteer Coordinator (2007-2010) insisted that the work the volunteers do is absolutely essential to the organisation. She claimed that Senegalese staff would 'never be able to write reports to the same standard' or possess the communication skills the volunteers exhibited, and she was particularly proud of the very high level of formal education of the volunteers she had selected during her tenure as Coordinator (many held undergraduate and graduate degrees from the most prestigious North American and European universities).

Indeed, the volunteers play an important (if officially understated) role in communicating Tostan's work in an appropriate and appealing way to external stakeholders, in an extension of the public relations role carried out by its founder and Director. As exemplified in individuals such as Samantha, many of the volunteers are well-read, well-travelled and possess writing and photography skills that can be usefully employed to productively engage Tostan's supporters. These supporters (part of the organisation's 'interpretive communities' [Mosse 2005: 8]) incorporate middle-class or even wealthy individuals, UN agencies, and government and corporate donors, as well as the general public in the United States and Europe, through the mass media. As the organisation grew in size and professionalism over the period of my research, the volunteers' role was increasingly clarified within organisational policy, as they became more and more important, particularly with the development of social media, which Tostan uses to considerable effect to enhance its international profile.

In this way, the volunteers are an example of an emerging class of 'transnational knowledge workers' (Colic-Peisker 2010: 482), who 'move within the culture of late capitalism, construed as global culture' (ibid: 471). Leslie Sklair positions these 'affluent movers from Western societies' within the framework of a 'transnational capitalist class,' which he refers to as a 'transnational elite' (Sklair 2001). Anne-Meike Fechter observes that:

> A key aspect of globalisation and transnationalism […] is the mobility of people, objects and ideas, as well as a fluidity of lifestyles and working practices. National borders or other boundaries such as those defining social, cultural or ethnic groups, are seen as being

> increasingly irrelevant, particularly for affluent movers. As Favell fittingly observes, 'internationally mobile 'elites' are often pointed to as the embodiment of the new transnational world. (Fechter 2007: 33-34)

Fechter goes on to question such 'discourses of fluidity' however, arguing that boundaries persist. Furthermore, she argues, 'global narratives' provide little sense of the 'everyday texture of the globalizing places we inhabit' (Conrad and Latham 2005: 228, in Fechter 2007: 34). In their role as 'transnational knowledge workers' (Colic-Peisker 2010: 482), the volunteers' stock-in-trade is their mastery of the language and visual tropes of international development. By harnessing their understanding of their target audience, and armed with sufficient material from their presence 'on the ground' working for Tostan in West Africa, they are able to offer carefully crafted snapshots of Tostan events, or personalised stories of Tostan participants (usual rural African women and girls). This knowledge work, I argue, is part of the volunteers' key role in reinforcing the official narratives that consolidate the legitimacy of the organisation's activities in the eyes of its supporters.

In addition, the volunteer alumni constitute an important tool of transnational networking and promotion for Tostan. For example, one task of the communications department is updating a website on the Facebook social network, entitled 'Tostan Volunteers and Alumni.' This is an important site of exchange and promotion for the NGO, in which members advertise jobs, disseminate links promoting Tostan's work and achievements, and generally maintain the profile of the organisation among its cosmopolitan group of former volunteers, many of whom as described above go on to work for United Nations agencies, donor agencies such as the United States development agency (USAID), and large multinational NGOs and corporations.

Given these factors, the Tostan management certainly sees an interest in maintaining its volunteer programme, and in the four years of experience I had with Tostan, I saw it grow in size and professionalization. One example of this is the formalisation of its orientation programme and its attempt to inculcate volunteers with a particular knowledge of 'African culture,' as I explore below.

## *Ndànk-Ndànk:* The 'cultural orientation' of the volunteers

> Culture has become an emic term of the international elite.
>
> (Hindman 2009a: 249)

On arrival in Senegal, Tostan volunteers undergo a practical 'orientation' session, aimed at

familiarising them with the organisation and environment (this was not the case when I began as a volunteer in September 2007, but over the course of my research I saw this aspect of the programme greatly developed). This typically involves a week-long stay at Tostan's *Centre de Capacitation pour le Développement Durable* (the 'Centre for Empowerment for Sustainable Development' or 'CCDD' as it was always referred to), an in-house training/conference centre in Thiès. Over this week, the volunteers receive an orientation led by the Volunteer Coordinator, and often interact with other staff members as well, who make presentations on their work with the organisation. They learn the history, activities and structure of the organisation, as well as their potential duties as volunteers. They may visit the nearby village of Saam Ndiaye, where the founder, Molly Melching, was based as a Peace Corps volunteer, and where she gained the experience that would later inform the foundation of the Tostan programme.[53]

The official Orientation, which is conducted almost entirely in English (the majority of the volunteers are either native English speakers or speak the language well), apart from introducing the basics of the Tostan programme and its operations, places heavy focus on 'culture,' as this blog entry from 2010 about the arrival of new volunteers indicates (Tostan 2010c):

> At Tostan, culture is key, so incoming volunteers quickly become well versed in Senegalese greetings, dress, and cuisine while learning deeper lessons about Senegalese life from dedicated Regional Coordinators and Tostan staff.

The volunteers are provided with numerous English-language materials, mostly in electronic format. These include Wolof vocabulary documents and the Tostan Orientation Handbook. A key text, often referred to throughout the orientation, is a book written in 1980 by Tostan founder, Molly Melching, entitled, *Ndànk-Ndànk: An Introduction to Wolof Culture*[54] (published by the US Peace Corps, and also used in the latter's volunteer orientation programme).

This book sets out the author's view of the world, expressed in binary language of 'Western'/'African' ('us'/'them'), setting the scene immediately with an introduction to life in Senegal in generalised terms of difference, framed within an organising dichotomy of Self/Other. Coming to Senegal is portrayed as a choice (by an American, presumably) to 'grapple with a

[53] Because of their long relationship with Molly Melching and Tostan, the inhabitants of Saam Ndiaye are very used to welcoming visitors such as these groups of new volunteers, as well as VIPs from UN agencies or international government representatives, journalists, and current and potential donors.

[54] *Ndànk-ndànk* literally means 'slowly, slowly' in Wolof, and here refers to the proverb*, ndànk-ndànk mooy jàpp golo ci ñaay:* 'little by little one catches the monkey in the forest,' summarised in the book as 'things take time!' (Melching 1980: 2)

whole new society whose values, priorities and goals are quite different from those we have been brought up with, have believed in, and have defended for many years' (Melching 1980: 2). The idea of who the reader is (a member of 'Western society'), along with a list of his/her presumed 'values' are laid out thus (ibid.):

> Consciously or unconsciously, we are all affected by the basic ideals of Western society. We learn from an early age that we should be competent, efficient, fair, organized, competitive, independent, industrious, honest, inquisitive, innovative and respectful of other people's material possessions and privacy.

According to the book, the reason why these particular qualities are valued in 'Western society' is that they are 'necessary to achieve the basic underlying goals of our society,' stated as being 'progress, individual freedom and material prosperity' (ibid.). This identity is then contrasted with 'Wolof society,' which is claimed to be different because 'the basic goals of its society differ from those of Western societies' (ibid.). These goals are stated as 'traditionally' being 'the well-being of the group and the harmony of the members of the community,' goals it claims are common to 'most Black African societies' (Melching 1980: 3). In the process, the book employs a monolithic characterisation of 'Western society' defined in relation to the Other (in this case 'Wolof society'), thereby indicating as much about the author's conceptions of the world as it does about the subject at hand. As Edward Saïd observed, such portrayals of Self and Other have often been used by Western writers to 'establish opposites and "others" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from "us"' (Saïd 1993: 3). For this reason, such a representation of Africa generally tells us far less about those who are being represented than they do about the perspectives and preoccupations of those engaged in the act of representing. Indeed, as Clifford Geertz (1983: 59) contends:

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

As Leti Volpp argues, this kind of characterisation of the Other 'invents a homogenous, "American" tradition of principles, a monoculturalism of transcendent values with a "we" or "us" as an unwavering center of rationality' (Volpp 2000: 112). She notes that such an assumption is 'historically inaccurate, relying upon distortions and marginalizations for its narrative coherence' (ibid.). Indeed, in its portrayal of Africa as a relatively undifferentiated space of 'Otherness,' the

timeless and homogenised depiction of 'most Black African societies' in *Ndànk-Ndànk* (Melching 1980: 3) effaces the histories of colonisation and decolonisation and diverse formations of African nation states, including decades of 'development' and 'modernization' interventions. The thinking evidenced in *Ndànk-Ndànk* obscures the historical and psychological complexity of its subjects, and is also open to charges of reification, and what Signe Howell refers to as 'totalizing conformity' (Howell 1997: 3). In *Ndànk-Ndànk*, and throughout the orientation training, Wolof or African (the terms are often used interchangeably) 'culture and society' is depicted as a fixed, monolithic essence that directs the actions of all its 'members.'[55] As Volpp (2000: 94) argues:

> Racialized culture becomes an essence that is transmitted in an unchanging form from one generation to the next. We can contrast this racialized culture, to culture that is considered to be 'hegemonic'- the culture established as the norm. Hegemonic culture is either experienced as invisible or is characterized by hybridity, fluidity, and complexity.

Volpp goes on to highlight how this notion that 'non-Western people are governed by culture, suggest[ing] they have a limited capacity for agency, will, or rational thought' is a depoliticising act as it neglects the power of 'non-cultural' forces in shaping reality (2000: 96-7), arguing that the idea that 'nonwhites' are more culturally determined can be traced to historical antecedents in colonialist and imperialist discourse. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak traces how the ideologies of colonialism and imperialism define the Other through depictions of the colonised as exotic, primitive anthropological objects (Spivak 1988). The depictions in *Ndànk Ndànk* and other Tostan publications, consciously or not, reproduce these tropes of West versus Other, presaging the inevitability of misunderstandings between the incoming volunteers and their new colleagues and neighbours, as this excerpt from the Tostan Volunteer Program Orientation Information Packet 2008, entitled, 'Points on Interactions,' illustrates (p. 18):

> Many volunteers come from much more individualistic societies where to care for yourself is seen as caring for others. This is not so in Senegal! It is sometimes difficult for volunteers to adjust to the 'everything for everyone' way of life where people ask more freely and usually give more freely. Being aware of the cultural norms and trying to be as polite and appropriate to the Senegalese culture as possible oftentimes helps volunteers feel more at ease. On the same note, though many volunteers welcome the openness and

[55] Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that there is no cultural unity in Africa, and that Africanist discourse has inaccurately grouped together vastly divergent cultures with little or nothing in common. 'Whatever Africans share… we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary … we do not even belong to a common race' (Appiah 1992: 26). 'The central cultural fact of African life,' he concludes elsewhere, 'remains not the sameness of Africa's cultures, but their enormous diversity.' (ibid.: 40)

> friendliness of many people they encounter throughout their time in Senegal, you may still have interactions that are frustrating or confusing.

This reified understanding of the notion of 'culture' is similar to that described by Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing in their critique of relativist thinking in anthropology:

> Society and culture are depicted as *sui generis*: as reified and as ontologically secure. They are modelled as entities not processes: hermetically discrete and internally integrated; the basis of all similarities and differences between people, the ground of their being, the bank of their knowledge. (Rapport and Overing 2007: 166)

According to Richard Wilson, 'bounded conceptions of linguistic and cultural systems' such as this are out of place in a context where 'culture' may be characterised as 'contested, fragmented, contextualised and emergent' (Wilson 1997: 9 in ibid.), contrary to the simplistic depiction of 'Senegalese culture' above. Indeed, for the volunteers, 'culture' was always a recurring theme, an explicit or implicit element of discussion and gossip both during the work day and after hours around the volunteer house, and was often used to make sense of various incomprehensible or seemingly deviant behaviours that they encountered during their time with Tostan, as I show below.

## Cultural tales from 'the field'

> I'm no stranger to big cities, but when I'm in Dakar I feel like a country mouse. My friends that live there like the ultra-swanky Lebanese bars where, no matter what I'm wearing, I feel very underhip. The bartenders ask my order in Wolof which means they think I'm in the Peacecorps. Which inevitably means I look frizzy, malnourished, and most likely wearing Birkenstocks. (Which respectively, I'm not, I'm not, and ok, I am).
>
> Blog entry by Mila, regional volunteer, 2010

Riley, a regionally based volunteer, admitted that during the year she spent as a volunteer in rural Senegal she felt emotions ranging from 'scared and tough and lonely and smothered and fascinated and bored and depressed and ecstatic. And I learned - a lot!' This account was fairly representative of the experience of regional-based volunteers, the general consensus being that these were 'tougher' but 'more meaningful' experiences than the city-based assignments. The physical hardships, loneliness and the 'cultural differences' were considered much more acute for those volunteers based outside Dakar, Thiès or another major urban location in West Africa.

Regional volunteers and those 'on mission' for weeks at a time were usually 'alone' in that they were the only foreigners in their regional office posting. Communications infrastructure was much less developed than in the metropolis, foreigners in general were much fewer and farther between and French (or English, in the case of The Gambia) was spoken to a much lesser extent. Difficulties were often augmented for the female volunteers in particular who complained more often of sexual harassment, and fielding even more questions about their marital status, queries they usually found uncomfortable, infuriating or simply tedious. Young, female volunteers were considered something of an anomaly by colleagues and neighbours in their regional locations, particularly because none of them had elected to live with a local family (despite offers from staff members) but instead chose to stay at the office *chambre de passage*. The one exception, Nicole, who was on a Fulbright exchange scholarship, lodged for a time with a family in Thiès but eventually fled rather guiltily to the volunteer house (even staying in hotel at one point) due to crowding and eventual conflict with her host family, as she described as follows in her blog:

> I decided to stay in a hotel room at least for one night, just to have some personal space, a shower, air conditioning, and other comforts that us Westerners are attached to… They're in the middle of remodeling the children's room for me (painting, constructing an [sic] huge armoire for my clothes, buying a new foam mattress, adding locks to the door… I actually wish they weren't so set on doing all this for me. They don't have the means, and it makes me feel guilty for wanting to spend some of my time at the Tostan volunteer house rather than live full time in my new room that I'm supposed to share with their two daughters.

Another volunteer, Anna, who spent six months in 2007-2008 in the town of Ourossogui in the northeastern Fouta region, was advised by the Regional Coordinator that a woman living alone was considered a '*pute'* (whore). She nonetheless declined to stay with a family, preferring to have her own 'privacy.' Most regional volunteers found that working and living in the office offered minimal privacy or freedom, however. They learned to deal with these issues in various ways: some ended up forming friendships and even romantic relationships with local staff members (as did those in the cities); others largely viewed the situation as an experience to be endured and looked forward to weekend breaks to a major city, and ultimately, their departure. A few ended up very much enjoying their 'regional' experience, and one volunteer who began in the regional city of Kaolack in 2008 was still in Senegal (if not in Kaolack) four years later.

Overall, however, many of these volunteers appeared to depart with the belief that they were leaving 'a society that doesn't respect women,' according to one. Similar to Nancy Cook's (2005: 359) finding from research among expatriate women in Pakistan who know little about the lives

of the Pakistani women around them, who 'draw on Orientalist received wisdom - primarily the discourse of the inferior, passive, oppressed "Third World (invariably Muslim) Woman" - to imagine those lives, in contrast to their own, as devoid of freedom and autonomy (Spivak 1985),' the way these volunteers spoke often implied that women in Senegal lived limited lives, dominated by domestic work, childrearing and patriarchal religious or 'traditional' practices. These representations (exemplified in a blog entry by Riley listing the 'hardest parts' about living in West Africa as: 'the pit latrines, the insects, the heat and the oppression of women') recall colonial-era fascination with representing Muslim women as subjugated at home in the harem (Shohat 1992). As Cook argues, these ideas sustain 'the falsely homogenizing notion that Muslim women's concerns are largely domestic, in contrast to foreign women travelers whose development work shows them to be well-educated, sophisticated, and worldly' (Cook 2005: 359).

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt describes how ideas of 'reality' can be challenged in what she terms 'contact zones': places where 'subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point[s] at which their trajectories now intersect' (Pratt 1992: 8). She stresses the importance of the term 'contact' and how it 'treats the relations among […] "travelers" and "travelees" not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interactions, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power' (ibid.). The volunteers, the local staff and other people they interact with are often challenged by behaviours and assumptions very different to their own. Despite (or perhaps because of) the 'cultural orientation' training they had received, the volunteers experienced many frustrations in their daily lives, perhaps augmented by reified ideas of monolithic 'cultural difference' and an inability to comprehend the diverse perspectives of people with a different historical and class background and divergent priorities and concerns in their daily lives. For Riley, who spent most of her 'service' in rural Senegal, the frustrations she felt on arrival in Dakar before her final departure home were exemplified in the following desire:

> Right now I just want to wear a miniskirt while drinking a fountain Diet Coke. Maybe doing that while eating a burrito and not having anyone ask me what my name is and what my country is and where my husband is. Dakar is halfway there – though there's no fountain soda in all of West Africa…

Volunteers' frustrations with their colleagues were caused by other perceived faults, as Riley complained:

> Don't ask me to explain the logic my coworkers use when conducting their day-to-day lives, as so often it seems like there is none. They and all their closest friends and most distant acquaintances just hang around in the courtyard all the time… a minimum of five, an average of fifteen, a maximum of infinity… all sitting around, eating, smoking, drinking tea, some getting paid a salary for all of this.

These negative feelings and ambiguities were often mutually expressed by the staff. In regional offices, local staff members sometimes suspected that the volunteers were there to more or less spy on them, and many of them assumed that the volunteers had a direct line and special relationship with the Director. One regional volunteer who had emailed Melching to report that she and other staff hadn't been paid on time, found that after her email was circulated back to the regional office, the staff there promptly gave her what she called 'the silent treatment' for communicating directly with the Director without consulting them first.

The perceived 'cultural gap' was often concluded to be insurmountable by the volunteers who spent a lot of time discussing the matter either among themselves or on their blogs. Riley devoted an entire blog post, entitled 'You Say Tomato,' to the topic of 'cultural differences':

> I was trying to work my feelings about cultural differences into a different blog post about my departure from Senegal, but really it deserves its own. Cultural differences, you guys—do not underestimate the importance of that for a second. Sure we are all humans and we have that in common and, blah blah blah, but this is by far the hardest thing I've had to overcome in Senegal and I have in no way overcome it at all.
>
> Using a pit latrine, taking a bucket shower—that is all easy enough to take in stride. Try waking up at seven in the morning to find yourself surrounded by Senegalese chatting away and then you have to go through a few rounds of greetings and handshakes with each one before you're able to use the pit latrine or bucket shower. That is the most difficult thing.
>
> And it's not something I've exactly gotten used to. I have accepted it to a certain extent, but ultimately I am not Senegalese and will never be Senegalese; I am American. A friend of mine who is in the Peace Corps in another West African country phrased it in a way that resonated with me: 'the music in the bars will never be my favorite, the food will never, the jokes will never …etc etc.' And it will never.

## Concluding discussion

Most of Tostan's volunteers arrive in Senegal in possession of considerable stores of 'capital,' in Bourdieu's (1986) understanding of the term, including economic, cultural and social capital. During their time with Tostan, many of these individuals accumulate social, cultural and

ultimately economic capital through their experience in Senegal. Sources include the bonds of friendship and collegiality that they build up among themselves, which can enhance their social and professional networks. The volunteers also develop these types of 'capital' through their contacts with development organisations and donors. They enhance their communication skills, in the process combining their advantage as cosmopolitan transnationals who engage in high status knowledge work with the authenticity and legitimacy conferred on them by virtue of their experiences 'on the ground,' that range from the '*toubab* bubble' of city life to the more physically and emotionally challenging demands of regional postings.

In this context, the ability to undertake unpaid internships or volunteer roles means that only the privileged have access to these kinds of opportunities. As de Jong (2011: 29-30) recalls, work for an NGO offers the opportunity to reinforce privilege:

> Many of the structures of the NGO world support the selection of the already privileged in NGO positions: the requirements of voluntary and internship experience before getting a fixed contract, the importance of networks and connections, the metropolitan locations of many organisations, and the dominance of the English language and requirements of multilingualism.

Any hardship the volunteers experience tends to be temporary, and in fact the experience of 'roughing it' was often viewed as something like a fun camping trip, an adventure, transient in nature, exotic, challenging, rewarding, possibly somewhat perilous on occasion, but ultimately useful as a rich source of travel tales, as well as character- and cultural capital-building. The temporary and situated nature of any hardships (including physical or social discomfort) made them easier to tolerate and indeed exotic ailments or stories of 'deprivation' such as a lack of hot showers or a good haircut, are often considered a badge of honour, a story to tell providing sets of photos to post on their Facebook pages.

The volunteers rarely recognise within their narratives their own position of privilege as elite transnational workers and travellers, and despite the evidence of wit, intelligence, and self-criticism shown in the various stories from volunteers provided above, they often display a naïve (or even narcissistic) obliviousness in their self-absorbed fetishising of 'Self' and 'Other.' In this way, they constitute the 'accidental elites' of expatriate life (Hindman 2009b).

The volunteers do not wish to be seen (and no doubt did not wish to see themselves) as members of an elite class, a phenomenon Heather Hindman (2009b: 673) argues is likely 'accentuated by the denial of perduring social classes by many Americans,' stating that, 'the American ethos that

often dominates class consciousness in Expatria seems to emplot everyone within this presumed normal class status,' i.e. middle-class (ibid.: 674). The volunteers' 'global passport' (Colic-Peisker 2010: 473) consists of nationality, education, and economic means, opportunities and safety nets, advantages that, if acknowledged, were tacitly disregarded by most as the product of 'luck' or 'blessing,' with little interrogation into the political foundations of them. Heron (2007) draws attention to the cultural discourse left over from the colonial era that produces a need to 'help' in the 'developing world,' suggesting that truth-claims, colonial construction of the 'Other' and notions of Western subjectivity juxtaposed with imaginings of the global South help bolster an imbalanced system of power. She argues that the power of this discourse enables people to 'find the places they expected to see' (Heron 2007: 31). As shown in this chapter, many volunteers travel to and experience a version of the global South that is supported by the dominant discourses of development and altruism, underpinned by the ideologically distinct cultural 'orientation' they receive from Tostan. Sociologist James Petras, writing critically about what he considers the superficial and ideological character of the volunteering act argues that it is 'superficial because it attends a fraction of those affected for a brief moment on terms that don't change the underlying causes. Ideological because the volunteering is a symbolic personal act that is in contrast to the impersonal structural decisions that affect substantive conditions' (Petras 1997: 1588). In this context, and in contrast to other migrants or transnational movers, whose migration is often associated with (at least initially) labour market disadvantage and a significant lowering of social status, the volunteers are individuals with 'human capital mobility' (Colic-Peisker 2010: 469).

Although many volunteers ultimately go on to benefit significantly in social and professional terms from their time with Tostan, they often experience ambiguity in their role as volunteers; an ambiguity that reflects the unstable position they occupy within the NGO's knowledge practices and power relations. On the one hand, as 'unpaid' interns assumed to be *bénévoles*, their role was publicly expressed in terms of altruism, giving, learning, and exchange, and their commitment was perceived as somehow less than that of a *salarié* (wage earning employee). In reality, however, many of the volunteers received a monthly stipend, a fixed payment that in many cases exceeded the salaries received by some of their permanent colleagues. Furthermore, although some felt they were under-utilised in their roles, others put in long working days and occasionally worked many extra hours in order to complete the tasks assigned to them. With the development of social networks and electronic media, the volunteers' knowledge work became even more important in reinforcing Tostan's key narratives, while still remaining somewhat invisible or

unacknowledged.

My experience as an 'insider' in this milieu led me to the following conclusion: because the pay the volunteers received was low by the standards of their home countries (approximately 100,000 CFA or £120 per month); because the other benefits they received (such as free housing) were rudimentary by Western standards (albeit comfortable by average local standards); because they were not legally permitted to earn a salary on the visa that they held (most volunteers held tourist visas); because they were tacitly homogenised by their colleagues and by the management as *toubab* Others to the Senegalese; because, thanks to the official 'orientation' they had received (coupled with the real physical and cultural challenges they faced in every day life), they viewed *themselves* as culturally Other to the Senegalese they encountered; and finally, because they were labelled as 'volunteers'—they were easily categorised as a group that was anomalous, or even external to Tostan, notwithstanding the complex reality of their situation within the organisation. The category of 'volunteer,' is thus in this case as much an active social construction as it is the product of 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2012a, 2012b) on the part of the organisation, which, as I have shown here, interpreted their presence and activities within the organisation in different ways depending on the context.

In the next chapter, I continue this thread of analysis by exploring the 'everyday politics' (Hilhorst 2003) of Tostan's Dakar-based employees.

# Chapter 7

## Everyday Politics in the World of Tostan Employees

### Introduction

As Hilhorst's ethnography of NGO life in the Philippines emphasises, organisations are characterised by 'multiples realities,' hinging around varied and sometimes conflicting discourses, interlinking different modes of operation (Hilhorst 2003: 146). NGOs in particular, she argues, 'are many things at the same time' (ibid.). Similarly, different meanings apply and are applied to Tostan as an organisation depending on the perspective of those involved and their interlocutors, even as these understandings are not always explicitly expressed by them. 'Tostan' can be understood as an African grassroots development movement, a 'family,' a human rights project, a feminist project, a source of livelihood, a bureaucracy, a scientific behaviour change model to be replicated, a *toubab* (Western) organisation operating in Senegal, a government partner, or a corporate partner, inter alia. In this chapter, the ethnographic focus turns to Tostan's urban-based staff as workers in the development industry, exploring the tensions and fragmentations between their understandings of the organisation (and their positions within it), and Tostan's formal objectives and policies.

The chapter is structured around this office life, beginning with a brief sketch of the *bureau* itself, and those who work there. I focus on the emergence of the staff *syndicat* (union), which was formed during my fieldwork, exploring the motivations of its members and their reaction to knowledge of certain events and organisational policies. In analysing the social and political relations of the Tostan Dakar office environment, I include my personal perspective on a tragic event that impacted on many at the office, reflecting Ruth Behar's argument that 'the personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of naval-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues' (Behar 1996: 14). I conclude the chapter with a discussion about the management of knowledge and ignorance in this context, including organisational attempts to govern what information is made public and what is kept private, as well as individual resistance to this. I situate these actions within actors' understandings of the formal aims and ideology of Tostan, itself shaped by the dictates of the donor-driven neoliberal development industry.

## Context: *tour du bureau*

The air-conditioned Dakar office, home to Tostan's international headquarters and the Executive Director herself, is far removed, geographically and culturally, from the rural villages where most of Tostan's programme activities take place. In mid-July 2009, returning from fieldwork in rural Casamance, I arrived at the office, relieved after the long, hot ferry trip to deposit my bags, get my bearings and greet colleagues and friends I had not seen since my departure from the capital six months before. The village life I had just left seemed a world away from Dakar, with its glittering shopping malls and dusty, suburban sprawl. At the office, I met with the smiles of welcome ready for all travelling team members (it is common for both staff and volunteers to spend weeks or months 'on mission' to the regional or national offices). Most of the Dakar staff had no idea where I had spent my absence or what I had been doing there. To many of them, I was another young *toubab* returning from 'mission,' and I was welcome back. Standing in the hallway sipping cool water from a plastic cup, my eyes were drawn to the notice board near the doorway. An animated UNICEF poster highlighting 'human rights and responsibilities' was pinned up, alongside a copy of a letter addressed to Tostan, in English, from Hilary Clinton. Next to it were some announcements in French, one of the upcoming marriage of a member of the Dakar staff, and the other a notice of bereavement for a programme facilitator in a regional office. The hallway was dotted with a colourful painting here and there: long dark figures of women gracefully balancing baskets and bundles on their heads, silhouetted against colourful backgrounds of orange, yellow, green and blue. The stairs adjacent led up to the first floor, where the Executive Director worked behind closed doors, sharing a large office with the Director of Operations, a fellow American, Caroline.

For most of the permanent employees of Tostan throughout Senegal, employment with the NGO consisted of office work, ranging from cleaner to finance manager. This was the case in the headquarters in Dakar and Thiès, and equally so in the regional offices dotted throughout the country. The 'daily grind' of much of the NGO world is paperwork: reports, evaluations, audits, grant writing, budgeting and communications (see Fechter and Hindman 2011). The everyday life of the majority in Tostan was no exception to this, and working with the NGO was for most of the local staff *liggey* (Wolof: work, or a job) in an office, as a secretary, a human resources assistant, or a guard, etc. In general, working for Tostan was viewed as simply a way to earn a living, not very different to working in any other establishment, whether it be a non-profit or a for-profit organisation. Many of the better educated and more ambitious staff hoped to carve out a long term career in development by moving on to bigger organisations, with better pay and travel

opportunities, and some of these staff members viewed work with Tostan as a stepping stone to getting a job with a UN agency or a large institution such as USAID. Similar to many of the young volunteers (whose experience in Senegal paved the way for future careers in development) for many of the local and expatriate staff members, 'Africa' is a career (to paraphrase the preface to Saïd's preface to *Orientalism*)[56] as their experience and expertise lies in negotiating the literal and figurative terrain of 'development' in Africa. Thomas, a 24-year-old volunteer who subsequently became a salaried programme manager at Tostan, stated quite simply that a high-flying job in development was the career goal to which he had directed all his educational aims and energies to date. By getting experience 'on the ground' with Tostan he was aiming to move up the ranks within the development industry, stating plainly 'I want to go to Geneva' (to work at the UN headquarters located there). Thomas hoped that the contacts he had built up with the UNICEF New York bureau through the programme he was managing with Tostan would help him to attain the 'holy grail' of a job with the United Nations, which he considered to be the pinnacle of achievement in the development industry.

As suggested in Chapter 6, working for a development agency in Senegal offered groups such as expatriate volunteers the opportunity to enhance their social, cultural and economic capital. Local staff were similarly able to build up valuable cultural and social capital (especially English language competence, highly valued in francophone Senegal, as well as all-important 'cross-cultural' skills achieved from experience working within an international development organisation) to enhance their CVs and future employment prospects. The main attraction of a career in development was the perception of a steady job, better wages and broader employment opportunities, although, as I will show in this chapter, Tostan's relatively low wage structure in comparison to other development organisations was a major source of discontent for many of the staff, and the reason why many of them were constantly on the lookout for work with other NGOs.

Indeed, a major characteristic of Tostan as an organisation was its high rate of staff turnover. It seemed that every time I visited a regional office, or was away from the Dakar or Thiès offices for even short periods, I would find new faces occupying desks on my return, and old faces in new positions. This was true across the board, ranging from the office or house guard to the receptionist, the volunteer coordinator, or the head of the monitoring and evaluation department

[56] Saïd prefaced his influential book, *Orientalism*, with a quote from Benjamin Disraeli's *Tancred*: 'The East is a career' (Saïd 1978).

(in each of these cases I encountered at least three different people in each position in the Dakar office over a three-year period). There were always a few constants, such as the Director herself, and several of the drivers or lower ranking administration staff, who had been mentored to take up these positions and who were unlikely to leave either because of loyalty or because they did not have enough formal education to feel confident enough to compete for similar work at other organisations.

A significant number of the Dakar-based staff in fact hailed from the Thiès region, as they had first been employed by Director there after she had set up Tostan, and were later transferred to the Dakar office as the organisation expanded. One of the *Dakarois* staff members, Ndiobo, grumbled that he could only work well with his fellow *Dakarois* colleagues, as the other staff were 'imported' from Thiès, and, he believed, were largely present because of their loyalty to the Director, and not their competence. For example, one of the young drivers, Mamadou, who had next to no formal schooling, was originally from Saam Ndiaye, the village in the Thiès region where Melching had worked as a Peace Corps volunteer. Mamadou could speak very little French and was almost illiterate, but he was a competent driver and errand-runner who had built up strong friendships with many of the Tostan local staff.

High levels of staff turnover, combined with the revolving door of volunteers, consultants, and researchers, and the ongoing expansion of the organisation gave daily office life a feeling of fluidity and flux. Nonetheless, despite these changes, and individual differences, strong friendships were formed among many of the longer-term local staff.

On a typical day in 2009, on entry to the Tostan International office in Dakar, a visitor was likely to be greeted by Ndiémé, the receptionist. (Ndiémé, a married woman in her 20s and the recent mother of twins, was at the time the only woman in the office to wear the *hijab*. A senior American staff member remarked once on his dissatisfaction that Ndiémé, the only veiled member of staff, should be the first person a visitor should meet on arrival to the office, as he felt it 'didn't give a good impression'). Ndiémé would barely look up, with a languid and disinterested air, as staff and visitors passed through reception. Beaming down at her over the fax machine was a framed photograph of Hillary Clinton, addressed, 'to the Tostan staff, with best wishes.'

The building where Ndiémé worked was home to Tostan's international headquarters in Dakar

(where the Executive Director was normally to be found when 'in-country'). There were around twenty people working in the office, occupied in administrative roles including finance, programme and grants management, and public relations activities. Most of the permanent staff were 'local hires,' supplemented by the constant rotation of young volunteers in short-term support and administrative positions. In this building, French, English and Wolof could be overheard through every office door, with French the language of general business, as was the case in most offices in the city. Any weekday morning saw the occupants of the dusty pink three-storey building arrive at work, greet Ndiémé and any others seated in the reception area with a handshake, and sign their names on the large attendance book perched on her desk. The Senegalese staff, resplendent in pressed shirts, slacks and polished shoes, or a colourfully embroidered wax *boubou*, usually entered each room in the building to exchange greetings in Wolof, French or English among themselves or with the young volunteers taking up position behind their laptops, more casually clad in cotton t-shirts, jeans and flip-flops. The office environment was very much a hybrid milieu. Although most people in the office were Senegalese, as a visiting PhD student remarked in a rather disappointed manner on hearing the amount of English spoken and observing the general work culture, 'walking into this office is like stepping into America!' In fact many worlds co-existed within this office milieu, and despite their physical proximity, social, professional and economic gaps were evident between different groups (such as local staff or volunteers, or indeed the more senior or junior staff of any nationality), as different cultural and professional activities, expectations and priorities served to create an environment of hybridity and difference, generally masked by the outward appearance of solidarity and co-operation displayed to visitors.

For many of the Dakar office staff, the Tostan programme was an abstraction, as most of them had little experience of its projects '*sur le terrain*' ('on the ground'; in contrast to staff in Thiès and especially the regional offices). Like the volunteers, their exposure to the programme in practice tended to be limited to short field visits to organise or report on a Declaration, or to assist with an audit. Their experience of Tostan's formal objectives was usually limited to the theory of the programme, coupled with frequent interactions with donors, politicians and celebrities on brief visits. They were therefore usually comfortable meeting new people and conversing in English and French. They also had a more relaxed approach to the volunteers, compared to the more segregated situation between staff and volunteers in Thiès, as was the case in 2007/8 (see Chapter 6).

The Dakar office was usually the first point of call for visitors to Tostan, and VIPs such as major donors or senior public officials would occasionally be taken on a '*tour du bureau*' by one of the managers or by the Director herself. The staff were usually forewarned of the visit of these important guests, with the email below typical of such an alert. Translated from the French, the email below addressed to the Dakar staff was sent by Jean in October 2009, who was at the time manager of Tostan's 'SMS project.'

> *Please note the visit of the new American ambassador to the office:*
>
> *Thursday, October 20, from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.*
>
> *Please take all necessary steps to offer a warm welcome to the ambassador and his staff.*
>
> *In particular:*
>
> *(1) Please ensure that your workspace looks professional and is tidy*
> *(2) Dress for the occasion*
> *(3) Teranga, teranga and Teranga![57] :)*

On these occasions, the Director would emerge from her office to eat lunch with the staff around the communal bowl of *ceebujen* (rice and fish) in the conference room on the roof terrace, which doubled as a dining room at lunchtime. A visiting reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* glowingly described the experience of lunch at the office as follows (Reaves 2007):

> The offices feel more like a home than a place of business. Everyone—staff, volunteers, drivers—eats lunch together, sitting on the floor around platters heaped with spicy rice mixed with meat and fish. It's the most democratic of meals, typical of both Senegal and the environment [Melching] cultivates.

Effort was made to ensure that foreign donors in particular were present at lunchtime to participate in this 'most democratic of meals' which in reality masked the more hierarchical and

[57] The concept of *teraanga* in Senegal implies hospitality and warm welcome.

fragmented aspects of social life in the office. Most of the staff took little note of VIP visits and the attendant email alerts, being used to new faces of every kind passing through the office, and rarely bothered to distinguish in any way between VIP and 'ordinary' visitors. They simply welcomed everyone politely, and continued to enjoy the lunch prepared by the excellent cook, Adji, as a social occasion: falling into groups to relax, chat and gossip among themselves, no matter who happened to be present. The general atmosphere in the Dakar office appeared generally welcoming and relaxed, albeit punctuated by occasional overflows of tension or conflict. Over time, I came to identify and better understand some of the tensions simmering below the surface that led to these outbursts, as I explore below.

## Of dialogue and disaffection: the staff union

Tostan's high level of staff turnover was evident across the organisation. Middle-ranking staff such as administrators or programme managers could be rapidly promoted or traded roles, but were even more likely to leave given a better opportunity. This was particularly the case for the more educated staff; employees at the lower end of the hierarchy (especially domestic staff such as cleaners and guards, and programme facilitators) who had no job security, were hired and fired seemingly at will. Furthermore, the majority of Tostan staff at the top of the pay scale were either American or French, a fact not disguised to the local staff by the use of the inverted organisational chart (see Appendix A). Indeed, the perceived disingenuousness of this '*organigramme à l'envers'* was a source of amusement for some of the staff members.

Joking banter about such matters, as well as more serious grievances, were largely communicated discreetly by staff among themselves over lunch, in the hallways, or through Skype conversations. On the few occasions when complaints were made public they tended to be summarily quashed by *la Direction* (the management), which attempted to keep a firm rein over public debates within the organisation. Consequently, when it came to work grievances in particular, most of the staff with ambition seemed to believe that they either had to endure a situation they were dissatisfied with, or leave.

However, in mid-2010, the local staff in Dakar and Thiès organised together in an attempt to form an officially recognised '*syndicat*' (union) under Senegalese law, electing a committee of representatives, holding regular meetings and making representations to the management. Until then, the staff had had no such representative body in place. One of the main changes sought by

the '*délégués du personnel*' (staff representatives) was more transparency regarding salaries and job duties. The general contention was that staff were underpaid in comparison to their counterparts in other international NGOs, and that there were major discrepancies within the organisation itself regarding staff salaries and benefits in relation to their duties (which the *syndicat* suspected were dependent on an individual's ability to negotiate, or on relationships with the Director, or a combination of both): the minutes of a meeting between the management and the *délégués* in August 2010 included the claim by the latter that 'Tostan wages are not aligned in equivalence with other NGOs and they are not standardised' (my translation from the French). Publications such as Tostan's Annual Report indeed emphasise its 'low-overhead, high-impact model' (Tostan 2009c), stressing that the bulk of funding is directed into programmes instead of towards salaries, equipment or other overheads.

The salaries policy in fact appeared to be ad hoc, and often based on an individual's negotiating power, even among the volunteers (as indicated in Chapter 6). Most of the staff in Dakar and Thiès were aware that many of the volunteers were often remunerated for their work and received other benefits such as accommodation and even airfares, and this contributed to their discontent at perceived duplicity and obfuscation. In mid-2010, there was much grumbling around the office about the salary of a '*vieille femme*' ('old woman'), who was apparently being paid the sum of 100,000 FCFA (around £150) per day as a consultant. No other details apart from this American's status as a '*vieille femme*' and her salary were discussed, but dissatisfaction rankled at such an amount being paid per day to a single individual, especially when the general perception was that money was never available when discussion turned to staff salary demands.[58] This consultant was in fact a retired professor emeritus in the field of nutrition and child development who had been hired for a year to manage Tostan's new 'child protection' project. Doubtless her consultancy agreement was appropriate on the international scale given her level of expertise and responsibility, and indeed her salary had been written into the grant proposal for the project, but the situation was not understood in these terms by many of the staff. They also grumbled about the convention that the American staff and the volunteers (regardless of nationality) were entitled to take American public holidays such as July 4th as days off, in addition to the Senegalese public holidays that everyone was entitled to. This was a practice that the Director had implemented as it

[58] Indeed, up until around that time staff often received advances on their salaries in times leading up to major social and religious festivals such as Tabaski (Eid al-Adha), and were sometimes given advances on request on other occasions, if an adequate reason were given. However, the Director of Operations had just recently announced that salary advances would no longer be granted; frustration lay in the fact that this had led to some requests being granted and some refused, apparently on an ad hoc basis.

corresponded with the conditions of employees of US government agencies in the country, such as USAID, the Peace Corps and the US embassy.

In response to these perceived injustices, and in an effort to improve their working conditions, the staff organised together to form a *syndicat*. This development was met with an unenthusiastic reception from the senior management team (at the time all expatriate), who appeared to view union activities as an unnecessary nuisance, an attitude evident one morning in late January 2010, at an all-staff meeting called at short notice by the Director. Everyone was assembled in the airy conference room on the roof terrace, wondering what the topic of discussion would be. As was usually the case, attendees were spread around the room in a loose circle. Typical of these all-staff meetings, that day, Melching, who had just returned from a trip to India (where she had been visiting a partner NGO with whom Tostan was collaborating to train elderly rural women to become 'solar engineers'), proceeded to recount the details of her sojourn in an excited and enthusiastic manner. Although at some point everyone present stood up on request and spoke in one or two sentences about what they were currently working on, most of the meeting was taken up with the Director's account of her trip, telling of the enthusiasm with which the Tostan project had been received in India, even suggesting that its human rights-based model could be used to dismantle the Indian caste system, through 'the power of dialogue.'

Melching attempted to share Tostan's triumphs with the staff members; perhaps in order to enable them to participate in her excitement and share in the warm reception she had received on her trip to India. As was usually the case however, most of those present listened politely, but appeared unmoved by her fervour. During the same speech, Melching informed the staff that visitors from the Nike Foundation were expected that afternoon at the office for lunch. She specified that the visitors would have their own bowl to eat out of, explaining that, 'Americans need their personal space.' Coming to the end of her address, Melching asked if those present had anything to bring up. At this point, Moustapha (a middle-ranking finance department employee formerly in the Guinea-Bissau office who had recently been re-assigned to Dakar) stood up and introduced himself as the Dakar representative of the staff union. I was seated next to the Volunteer Coordinator (an American, who also happened to be the Director's daughter), who immediately began to roll her eyes and grumble about Moustapha's demand for an official '*grille de salaire*' (salary schedule), an expression of distaste crossing her face. A similar expression of aversion appeared on the faces of both the Executive Director and the Director of Operations, Caroline, as Moustapha began his speech. The atmosphere in the room became animated as staff began to stir

in their seats with interest. After Moustapha had finished outlining the union's demands and had taken his seat again, Caroline, without standing up, responded briefly, stating that 'now is not the time' to talk about the issues he had raised. As Moustapha attempted to reply, she interrupted with a brief, 'we'll hold a meeting separately about it in a few weeks, I'm very busy at the moment,' and looking towards the Director, she declared the meeting over. From the chatter in the room following the departure of the management, I could not fail to note the irony of this quashing of an attempt at 'dialogue' so soon after the Director's profession of its power and applicability.

Despite the management's tepid early reaction to their activities, union representatives continued to take their role very seriously, familiarising themselves thoroughly with the national *Code de Travail* (Labour Law), holding regular meetings and circulating by email the meeting minutes they had meticulously recorded. The minutes of a meeting in July 2010 show that the '*grille salariale*' (including a demand for a 'thirteenth month' of salary to be paid at the end of the year, a common convention among many employers in Senegal) and the salary policy in general were still the main concern, alongside the '*régularisation*' of the status of the Tostan facilitators. Regarding the latter, who are the primary implementers of Tostan's programme, the minutes of this meeting stated that the 'image or place' accorded to the facilitators by Tostan was 'paradoxical,' if one juxtaposed the idea of them as the 'principal auteur of programme results achieved at the grassroots' with their treatment ('meagre pay with no social or medical security'). The facilitators were not entitled to these job benefits due to the status conferred on them by Tostan as '*prestataires*' (consultants or service providers). The union therefore strongly suggested 'an improvement to [the facilitators'] working conditions' either by increasing their net salary, offering them a contract for the duration of the project, or coverage of health benefits. At the same meeting it was also suggested that the Board of Directors invite staff representatives to its meetings at times of 'important decision-making in relation to the staff of the organisation. This would be to ensure the promotion of democracy within the NGO' (all quotes above are excerpts from the minutes of a union meeting, July 2010, my translation from the French).

Regarding the situation of facilitators, at a presentation on 'Social Entrepreneurship' at the Skoll World Forum in Oxford in 2012, Tostan's Director explained the organisation's success in employing and retaining them, stating that 'nobody steals our facilitators usually because they don't have degrees' (Skoll World Forum 2012). Melching highlighted this by explaining that Tostan's facilitators are 'people from the community that only had 5 to 6 years of school, basic

school, so they could read and write a little bit, and you cannot imagine their motivation, up til 12 or 1 every night, studying, learning, just wanting so badly to succeed' (ibid.). Stressing as a positive the fact that 'they don't make high salaries at all, they make a very, very low salary' (ibid.), the implication was that because of their low levels of formal education (Melching characterised them here as 'school dropouts'), facilitators were not in demand at other organisations (such as UNICEF) and did nor or could not expect to earn more than these 'very, very low' salaries.

This was indeed the case with my host 'mother' Bintou, in Casamance (who, in the year after my fieldwork in Elounou, succeeded in getting paid work as a Tostan facilitator, although when I met her some time after this, she complained strongly about her meagre pay and the inadequate reimbursement of travel costs). Hardly a 'school dropout,' however (the use of the term 'dropout' in the above context has moralising connotations, I argue, implying voluntary withdrawal),[59] Bintou was, in my experience, typical of rural Tostan facilitators, whose limited formal education was largely the result of economic constraints, e.g. an inability to afford school fees and materials or the need to contribute to the household through activities such as agriculture (see Kea 2007). Limited economic opportunities, both locally (agricultural production was on the decline in Casamance with recurrent droughts over the previous ten years, and many of the village's youth had migrated for work to The Gambia, Dakar and abroad) and nationally, meant that people with low levels of education indeed faced few opportunities for economic advancement, especially within the development paradigm (returning to Bourdieu [1986], such actors may be understood as having little economic and [institutionalised] cultural capital, contributing to their weak position within this milieu). However, to my knowledge, such a representation (i.e. acknowledgment of facilitators' low pay, and the characterisation of them as 'school dropouts') was never employed by the Director (or other management representatives) in the local context, and is, I argue, another example of the strategic employment within official organisational discourse of a range of narratives, depending on the context and the perspectives of the audience.

The recently recruited human resources (HR) manager, Oumar, usually represented the management at union meetings, such as the one described above. As a go-between for the executives, Oumar was valuable to the organisation, as he was an excellent public speaker. However, many of the staff expressed disappointment that following the flowery speeches he had

[59] The Oxford Dictionary of English defines 'dropout' (noun) as 'a person who has abandoned a course of study or who has rejected conventional society to pursue an alternative lifestyle' (Stevenson 2010: 537).

made about improving working conditions following his appointment, he appeared to be an empty vessel when it came to action. Oumar clearly revelled in the trappings of his position as HR manager, but seemed to lack a real commitment to the principles he espoused so eloquently, be they improving staff conditions and salaries, or communicating and implementing the sexual harassment policy which the management had recently drawn up in response to incidents such as those involving the volunteer, Melanie (discussed in Chapter 6). Indeed, it was obvious that on his arrival, Oumar, despite his senior position and role as public advocate of the organisation's sexual equality and sexual harassment policy, was himself clearly excited to be surrounded by young women. In the early weeks of his appointment the volunteers joked about the clumsy approaches he had made towards them (including once turning up at the *maison des volontaires* uninvited in the evening, clad in a hip-hop style tracksuit to invite 'the young ladies' out in his car to learn about 'Senegalese culture'). Some complained of Oumar's so-called 'sketchy' way of greeting them (saying that he stroked the insides of their palms inappropriately while shaking hands), or his requests to bring him coffee in the morning. Perhaps on the lookout for a second wife, Oumar eventually took one of the younger HR staff members in Thiès as a *deuxième femme*.

During the period of my fieldwork in Dakar, the union had a certain amount of success in achieving some of its demands, as a salary schedule was certainly promised by the management on multiple occasions. The *syndicat* also raised the case of a Tostan supervisor (one step up from a facilitator) in the Matam region who, despite working with Tostan for over a decade, had latterly worked for over a year out of contract, and following the termination of the project he was working on, had been dismissed without receiving his salary. The NGO subsequently promised to deal with this matter under the law. Demands for payment of the 'thirteenth month' remained fruitless as *la Direction* had ongoing 'budgetary problems' in awarding this. At a meeting in August 2010, the 'regularization' of the status of facilitators was promised through 'work contracts and all other benefits awarded to permanent staff.' Supervisors were to be retained on project contracts. The management also promised to work on 'regularizing' the situation of domestic staff. Calls for *délegués* to be present at Board of Directors meetings were met with the statement that this was not provided for within statutes governing the organisation, although management indicated that they would reflect on this. At the same meeting, staff requested clarification about which legal conventions took precedence in relation to the NGO (i.e. Senegalese or US law), and were told that as Tostan was an 'American NGO' it was governed by 'American laws and regulations […] Tostan has opted to source its human resources in Africa […] Tostan exists as a distinct NGO with various denominations depending on its country of

operation' (excerpt from minutes of union meeting with management, August 2010, my translation from the French).

Overall, there was an evident lack of interest or commitment on the part of the management in seriously engaging with the union. Over the months that followed, the membership of the *syndicat* in its existing form was effectively neutralised, with several of its major actors gradually relocated to offices outside the country, and one even fired, over a separate incident, although the movement did continue to function.

The *syndicat* had been brought about because of a desire on the part of the office staff to improve working conditions, not only for themselves but also for field staff and ancillary employees. Below, I explore an event that occurred in Dakar in late 2009, which, in bringing to light knowledge of the working conditions of one category of Tostan employees, impacted strongly on those working in the Dakar office (including myself).

## Nafi

Many affluent households in Senegal employ '*gardiens*' (guards). These are men of all ages whose main activity is essentially to occupy the buildings where they are employed, especially when the occupants are absent. The term 'guard' may conjure images of a uniformed man, possibly armed, on strict patrol around his area of responsibility. However, most *gardiens* in Senegal are very different to this, being more similar to caretakers than security personnel (although in some of the very affluent areas of Dakar, and around embassies, guards may be uniformed and possibly armed). Typically, most Tostan *gardiens* at the offices and *chambres de passage* I visited across the country fulfilled the former role. Young and old, clad in plain trousers, t-shirts and cheap rubber flip-flops, they spent most of their day somewhere in the vicinity of their post, often seated in plastic chairs in the shade, drinking *attaaya* in the company of neighbours.

The guard employed at the Tostan volunteer house in Dakar in 2009 was, in many respects, no exception to this profile. Youssou was a squat, gentle man of few words, always accompanied faithfully by his little daughter, Nafi, a lively, inquisitive child of two or three years of age. Youssou's gentle nature and devotion to his daughter, as well as his obliging manner, made him popular with the inhabitants of the volunteer house (unlike many guards, he was usually available

when needed to let someone without a key into the building, and he even understood some French, a fact appreciated by most of the volunteers). At night, Youssou would sleep downstairs in the hallway on a foam mattress that he would carefully roll up and store with his few belongings under the stairs each morning. Occupants returning to the house late in the evening would find him dozing on his bed near the front door, with little Nafi sprawled out next to him, clad only in her shorts, the ubiquitous strings of leather *gris-gris* (talismans) around her waist, neck and wrists, for protection from evil spirits. The little girl was very popular with the occupants of the house. Some of the volunteers spent their evenings drawing pictures, playing games, and sharing their meals with her. Many mornings Nafi would sit perched on my lap as her father performed his morning ablutions, nibbling on the *ndambeh* (bean) breakfast sandwich I had bought from the street vendor down the road, and peering in gentle wonder at the screen of my laptop computer.

Youssou's wife occupied a half-finished building close to the volunteer house (itself a large comfortable new three-storey building on a pleasant street five minutes' walk from the Tostan office). It is common around Dakar to see poor or homeless families squatting in buildings under construction, for which the funds to complete them have likely dried up. Families may inhabit these half-built structures for years, often with no doors, plumbing or even roofs. Youssou's wife usually brought him over supper in the evening, joining him and Nafi as they lay on woven mats outside the house, enjoying the evening air over a glass of *attaaya*, the gentle murmur of the portable radio in the background. Returning from the office around six each evening, the occupants of the house would find the family taking up this position, and I usually stopped to greet them and tickle little Nafi before heading to my shared room upstairs. One day in late November 2009, on my return from the office, I found the family in their customary position under the tree outside the door, although this time Nafi was not sitting up on the mat and chattering as usual but was stretched out, dozing in the muggy early evening warmth. I encountered the same scene on my return the next evening, and this time her father informed me that she was *feebar* (ill, in Wolof). Thinking little of it, I assumed that she was affected by one of the usual bugs or ailments common among little children, and I offered him some cough lozenges to give to her, which he accepted with thanks. The following days unfolded as normal, as I and other members of the household made our daily trek through the sandy streets to and from the office, chatting idly about work, food, office gossip and plans for the weekend. The upcoming weekend was Thanksgiving, a very important event for the American population of the house, and plans were afoot for a big cook-up to mark the occasion.

That Friday afternoon, I sat at the kitchen table with two of the volunteers, Julia and Nicole, chatting together as we baked a cake for the evening's festivities. The kitchen was a typical indoor-outdoor arrangement (albeit much better equipped than most) with a four-ring gas burner and oven, a new refrigerator, and a large wooden table and chairs facing onto a small paved courtyard containing an enclosed toilet and shower. Every evening Youssou would appear in this courtyard, located to the rear of the house, to give Nafi her evening bath and perform his ablutions before praying. That evening Youssou appeared as usual, slipping quietly in and making his way towards the shower in his usual unobtrusive manner. We called him over to offer some freshly baked cake, as I inquired cheerfully, '*où est Nafi*?' ('where's Nafi?'), knowing she would love to have some cake. Youssou replied simply, in a very low voice: '*elle est décedée*' (she is dead).

I blinked, wondering if I had misheard him. The blood rushed to my head as I tried to process these words, which made no sense to me. I couldn't help but think what a strangely formal way this was to put it, literally, 'she is deceased,' and my reaction was again one of denial: I must have misheard him. But the kitchen had become completely still, the chatter frozen as if a cloud of icy air had descended upon the speakers, freezing them into immobility. I remember thinking very simply, 'not true; he is joking.' I could see that the blood had drained from the faces of Julia and Nicole, and all three of us began to tremble. Youssou stood motionless, as if completely numb of all feeling, like a man whose actions were being directed by a force external to him. I thought: 'why didn't you tell us she was so sick, we did not know she was so sick! How could this happen? Why didn't you ask for help?' I remembered the cough lozenges I had given him for her, and felt revulsion at this trite gesture and my own lack of awareness. All these thoughts crowded into my mind at once, but all I did was take Youssou's hand and say I was sorry, the words as useless as any I had ever uttered. Everyone was in deep shock.

It turned out that the childish cold I had blithely assumed Nafi was afflicted with was in fact yellow fever. After suffering for several days, Youssou had eventually taken Nafi to a hospital that very day, but by then it was too late.[60] Always a quiet man, he now became completely withdrawn, and the atmosphere in the house was heavy with unspoken melancholy for weeks

[60] Yellow fever is an acute viral disease, transmitted by the bite of the female mosquito, and is preventable by vaccination. Treatment is symptomatic only, and up to 50% of those severely affected will die if not treated (WHO 2014).

afterward.[61] I, like many of the occupants of the house, was afflicted with guilt at the idea that Nafi need not have died from this disease, living in a house where everyone except her father had easy access to money for medical diagnosis and treatment. We wished that the clock could simply be turned back and that things had turned out differently. Although most beds in the house were equipped with mosquito nets, Youssou had none. A bed net to sleep under would almost certainly have prevented Nafi from being bitten by mosquitoes and contracting the disease. We believed that if Nafi had received treatment earlier she might well have survived, and that the main reason this did not happen was because Youssou did not have enough money available (hospitals in Dakar usually require payment upfront).

I understand the loss of Nafi to yellow fever as one of countless 'stupid deaths' (Farmer 2005: 144) that could likely have been prevented by vaccination, access to a bed net, or speedy treatment. Another factor that made her death particularly hard to cope with was its invisibility. The relationships among the '*famille de Tostan'* at the office, especially the long-serving members, were generally quite close, and if one among them had lost a child, it would have become known and recognised. However, Youssou had little contact with the office staff (apart from the volunteers, of course). Although he was known to other staff members from his occasional visits to the office at lunchtime, his unassuming character, combined with his lowly and liminal position in the organisation (as a Tostan Dakar employee who was rarely physically present in the main office), ensured that he and the loss he had suffered were invisible to the eyes of most. For a time, Nafi's death barely seemed to register beyond the walls of the house. Subsequently, some staff members learned of the event from the volunteers and it was in conversation about Nafi's death that I came to learn about Youssou's employment conditions from one of the middle-ranking staff members that I had known for some years, 31-year-old Amadou.

According to Amadou, like most of the full-time guards employed by the organisation, Youssou's monthly salary was just 50,000 CFA (less than £60). Furthermore, Amadou informed me, Youssou was retained on the organisation's books as a 'consultant,' i.e. he was not classified as a

[61] Something I found particularly difficult to deal with in the aftermath of this tragedy was the fact that, due to the constant turnover of occupants in the house, within a month or so, many of the people who had known Nafi had departed, to be replaced by others who had never known her, nor had heard of what had happened to her. For new arrivals, Youssou was the reserved *gardien*, who barely spoke to anyone, and no more. For myself, and the remaining inhabitants who remembered her, the memory of Nafi lingered like a cold shadow, and although after a while we ceased to speak of her, for those that remembered her, the loss of her among us was ever-present.

member of staff. As such he was not entitled to the employment benefits stipulated by Senegalese law, such as sick leave, holiday leave, or healthcare benefits. This was the case for the majority of Tostan employees of his rank (including guards, maids, cooks, and facilitators), with a few exceptions. The position of these members of the organisation was precarious and poorly paid. With little education (very few could speak any French, for example) their employment options, especially in a country with a formal rate of unemployment of around 48% (CIA 2013) were limited, to say the least; they had no bargaining power and effectively no support from the State.

Youssou also appeared to have no fixed abode in the city (many of the poorest people in Dakar are rural migrants; on the few days when he was absent from the house Youssou said he had gone to '*mon village*'). His wife was squatting in very basic conditions nearby, and as such it probably made sense to them that Nafi would have stayed with her father; the volunteer house was safer and more comfortable than the half-finished building her mother inhabited. As Amadou pointed out, the salary Youssou earned was not enough to enable him to rent accommodation for his family, especially if he were sending remittances to his village family too, as is the case with many rural migrants (see Linares 2003). The provision of a decent living wage and health benefits would clearly have had a huge impact on Youssou's life, he said. In explaining all this, Amadou concluded that the system that Tostan operated to retain people like Youssou by classifying them as 'consultants' (despite the fact that the work they do could in no way be deemed to constitute a 'consultancy,'[62] nor was the payment they received enough to cover, as consultants' fees usually do, living costs such as accommodation and healthcare etc.), was a way of taking advantage of this classification in order to avoid the obligation to provide them with adequate wages, benefits and job security.

Around two weeks after Nafi's death, Astou, the maid who came each day to clean the volunteer house (and who had worked there for many years), mentioned to members of the household that her son had been in hospital for the past week, gravely ill, and that she was very worried because she could not continue to pay the hospital fees for him. Still shaken by the loss of Nafi, and understanding that Astou had very little money to pay medical fees, the occupants (including myself) clubbed together to give Astou some money for her son's hospital treatment. The news of the boy's illness made it to the ears of some of the staff members at the office, including Amadou.

[62] The Oxford Dictionary of English defines a 'consultancy' as 'a professional practice that gives expert advice within a particular field' (Stevenson 2010: 374); a 'consultant' is thus 'a person who provides expert advice professionally' (ibid.).

On learning of Astou's plight, he took the unusual step of sending an email around to all the Dakar staff petitioning them to contribute to the fund to help her son. With the subject heading *'Soutien à une "collègue"'* ('Support for a "colleague"'), the email referred to the death of Youssou's daughter and pointedly included information on Astou's precarious situation as a '*consultante*' (my translation from the French):

> *Dear Tostan Dakar Family,*
>
> *Last month we learned of the death of the daughter of the guard at the volunteer house, following an illness. We couldn't do anything about this. Life is so cruel, even innocent children are not spared the fate of death. It is no-one's fault, nevertheless, we told ourselves, if only we could have done something about that.*
>
> *Astou's son is currently ill and has been in hospital for a week. The child needs healthcare and medicine. Astou is not regarded as an employee by Tostan, but instead is a consultant and therefore does not benefit from medical care for herself or for her child. In our hearts, Astou is an employee of Tostan in her own right, and we treat her as such in our social relations with her. Indeed she is our sister, as we talk of ourselves as a family. In times like these, people feel the presence or absence of their family. Astou thinks that she must work in order to avoid losing her job and to also have enough money to buy medicine for her child.*
>
> *She will doubtless be present at the office for lunch. If anyone can give her any moral or financial support in this situation, it will help a lot. If you have money to give, give it directly to her.*
>
> *I found it necessary to share this with you, now the choice is yours to do what you believe is right.*
>
> *Thank you all for your time.*
> *Amadou*

The staff responded heartily to this request to help Astou. Amadou's decision to send around an email detailing Astou's employment conditions was met with disapproval by the Director, however, who rebuked him for making knowledge of Astou's employment status public without

her authorisation. Melching subsequently promised to amend Astou's contract to classify her as a staff member (and thus ensure that she and her family were eligible for the health benefits stipulated by Senegalese employment law). This decision was applied uniquely to Astou however, and was not extended to other domestic employees across the organisation. Many of the higher ranking (expatriate) staff expressed great sorrow at Youssou's loss, and contributed generously to the little fund set up for Astou's son ('happy to contribute in order to avoid tragedy,' according to one), but did not appear to question the organisational policy of employing Astou as a consultant. Astou's son recovered, much to everyone's relief, but this event further contributed to the discontent smouldering in many corners of the office.

Although anger as well as sadness was evident in the reaction of some of the staff members to the death of Nafi, I never saw evidence of anger in Youssou's reaction. He became more silent, as if quietly accepting the inevitability of the tragedy, muttering simply, '*ndogal Yallah*' ('it's God's will').[63]

## Concluding discussion: knowing, unknowing, and public secrets

As an NGO, Tostan is an ideological institution construed as 'doing good' (Hilhorst 2003: 7), and as such its designation and activities have a moral character. A further feature of non-profit work is that it is donor-dictated, meaning that financial decisions are constrained by the requirement to conform to donor demands. NGOs are in constant competition with each other for relatively scarce resources from international donors. Most donors are loath to provide funding for expenses such as salaries, equipment and organisational infrastructure, and consequently NGOs are generally under immense pressure to ensure, or be seen to ensure, that the bulk of funding goes on 'programme expenses' (Sabatini 2002). In this respect Tostan is no different to any other NGO, and indeed is well regarded: according to the influential website Charity Navigator, 82% of its money is spent on programme expenses (Charity Navigator 2014). Its founder and Director publicly emphasises that she keeps running costs low, including her own salary, considered relatively modest by international CEO standards (Reaves 2007). The 2007 *Chicago Tribune* article referred to above quoted Melching's statement that she was the 'the only paid American staffer in Africa, and I keep my salary low,' adding, 'we decided… to run [an] organization where people are empowered at all levels' (ibid.).

[63] See Nancy Scheper-Hughes' [1992] ethnographic account of the fatalistic acceptance by shantytown mothers in northeastern Brazil of the death of their children, 'without weeping.'

However, this situation had changed by the time my fieldwork began in 2009. By then there were several full-time, salaried American and European employees in the Dakar office (these were noticeably the most generously remunerated members of staff, also receiving the most comprehensive health benefits packages). This was in contrast to a verbal commitment made by the Director earlier that year that only Africans would be hired in permanent positions with Tostan from then on. Perhaps a contributing factor to this backtrack was the increasing professionalization of the organisation over time as it experienced rapid growth in both its activities and its public profile in the year following its award of the prestigious Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize in 2007 and concerted efforts to scale up its activities (see Mike Davis' [2006] critical analysis of the professionalization of NGOs in his study on urban poverty). The growing numbers of expatriate staff and their increased remuneration did not go unnoticed by middle-ranking local employees, particularly when it became known of an attempt by management to disguise the full salary received by one expatriate manager in 2009, who received his wages in tranches from Tostan bank accounts in three different countries, in order to ensure (the staff believed) that the earnings he received through the Senegal account appeared appropriately modest.

Occurrences such as these, combined with the disclosure of knowledge about the employment conditions of domestic workers and facilitators (e.g. their status as 'consultants'), particularly in light of the tragic loss of little Nafi under the roof of the volunteer house, galvanised and consolidated the activities of the staff union. Its endeavours were largely propelled by middle-ranking administrative staff members, who were mostly educated young men in their 20s and early 30s (such as Amadou and Moustapha), clearly motivated by a strong sense of justice and, perhaps, frustration (as they came to believe that there was likely a ceiling on their ability to advance within the organisation). By virtue of their education and position within the organisation, these employees were familiar with both Senegalese employment legislation and the human rights doctrine underpinning Tostan's programmatic activities. Their stated understanding of events was that, through its employment policies, Tostan was taking advantage of the fact that most employees (in particular the lowest ranking) were not knowledgeable of their rights under law, and also that they would probably not expect these rights to be enforced due to the general weakness of law enforcement in Senegal. The discontent and resentment simmering within the walls of the Dakar office was largely emanating from these middle-ranking employees and not from people such as Youssou or Astou, who tended to have very low expectations in relation to their employer and focused largely on keeping their jobs, come what may.

Amadou and Moustapha's knowledge of the moral character of Tostan's vision ('dignity for all') and its primary programme activity (human rights education), juxtaposed with their perception that the NGO management deliberately took advantage of its workers' ignorance of their legal rights, and their outrage at the incongruity of a domestic worker being classified as a consultant, mobilised them to agitate for better employment conditions within the organisation. I concluded from conversations with these architects of the *syndicat* that they were at first genuinely hopeful that, given Tostan's stated commitment to empowerment and collaboration, dialogue with the management would surely lead to the negotiation of better pay and conditions for local employees across the organisation. Tostan's formal ideology and approach is exemplified in a 2001 book on women and development in which founder Melching outlined the basis for Tostan's philosophy in facilitating a 'non-threatening environment' in order to enable its participatory educational sessions, applying the Wolof proverb, *'xuloo amul, ñaq waxtaan mo am*' ('fighting doesn't exist, only a lack of discussion exists') (Melching 2001: 162):

> Sitting in a circle (as one does in a traditional African village square); allowing each person to express his or her idea (as happens in a village meeting); listening carefully and patiently to others' ideas (as is taught in traditional African education); coming to consensus through negotiation and mediation (well-known African skills), making use of the oral tradition.

On many levels, Tostan did appear to operate in this manner, with all stakeholders nominally free to express themselves no matter the forum, be it a '*rencontre inter-villageoise'* ('inter-village meeting') in advance of a 'Public Declaration' organised by regional personnel, or a monthly all-staff meeting at the NGO headquarters. However, as illustrated above, efforts to initiate public dialogue on employment conditions were met with resistance by the management, in no small part, I conclude, due to its opposition to union members' public disclosure and interpretation of information disruptive to the organisational narrative of human dignity and equal rights. As Mosse (2005) argues, development involves not only social work, but also the conceptual work of translation and mobilisation necessary to sustain authoritative narratives and networks for the ongoing support of policy. In this context, the management of information is required in order to maintain the 'public fiction' (Geissler 2013: 28) of collaborative partnership and equality at all levels of Tostan, as a donor-driven organisation. In this context, 'unknowing' is as important as 'knowing.'

Michael Taussig (1999) emphasises the political importance of unknowing. Discussing Taussig's interpretation of 'public secrets' in his study entitled *Public Secrets in Public Health,* Geissler

argues that, for Taussig, 'what is known but must not be articulated in a given social arrangement, especially pertaining to hierarchy and domination, is constitutive of social order through a double bond with power: making domination unspoken, silencing critique and resistance, and exacerbating power differentials' (Geissler 2013: 15). 'Power rests thus not just in knowledge; "unknown knowns" are the apotheosis of power' (ibid.). Knowing and unknowing are thus interdependent.

As I have shown in this chapter, 'unknown knowns' about Tostan's employment policies and practices across its different levels were a feature of the organisation's social and political environment and were exercised by different actors in a range of ways. Related to this were the blurred lines framing membership of the Tostan 'family.' For the occupants of the volunteer house, little Nafi was a member of the 'family' and her passing was a loss all the harder to bear due to colleagues' and management's ignorance of it. For Amadou, Astou was 'an employee of Tostan in her own right, and we treat her as such in our social relations with her. Indeed she is our sister, as we talk of ourselves as a family.' Although Astou's work was physically located outside the office building itself in the volunteer house close by, because she came to the office most days for lunch, and had a warm relationship with many of the staff and volunteers, it came as a surprise to some (including herself) to learn that she did not enjoy the same contractual status and attendant employment benefits as other 'family' members. At the discursive level, all members of the 'family' were equal, but the practical implications of employee differentiation created through organisational policies were not to be made 'known.'

Deliberate 'unknowing' was evident at many levels, including in the actions of Oumar, the HR manager, whose overtures towards his female subordinates indicated his deliberate ignoring of the new sexual harassment policy he was personally tasked with imparting to the staff. Senior expatriate managers, quick to express their sorrow at Nafi's death and support for the fund to help Astou's son, turned their analytical gaze away from uncomfortable questions raised internally, such as why a long-time worker at an international human rights organisation was forced to rely on the charity of her co-workers in order to help ensure her son's survival. I concluded that, ironically, many of the expatriate staff were genuinely sympathetic to Astou's plight due to their own direct experiences of being 'uninsured' for many years prior to negotiating a contract with Tostan that provided them with healthcare benefits, as was the case with the US citizens, in

particular.[64] Their generous acts of donation to support Astou were, I argue, a microcosm of the depoliticised culture of philanthropy and 'giving back' characteristic of development projects in general in the neoliberal era (Leitner et al. 2007). These staff members did not appear to interrogate the issue any further; in other contexts I had discussed with them their experiences of vigorously negotiating their remuneration packages with the Tostan management in advance of signing their contracts (in one case taking six months to reach an agreement). However, in discussions about Astou's plight, these expatriate employees drew no parallels between her situation as an employee and their own, ignoring the socio-political and structural advantages that they possessed that enabled them to negotiate their own situations from a strong position. Instead, their narratives reflected an understanding of their own more comfortable situations in terms of individual effort (e.g. their hard work at university and afterwards, gaining experience 'on the ground' in Africa etc.) within the context of what they considered to be their relatively modest remuneration demands. In fact, their perspectives reflected another aspect of Tostan's formal ideology and objectives: the exercise of individual responsibility, a fundamental tenet of development discourse in the neoliberal era (see Davis 2006; Harvey 2005).

I conclude this discussion by pointing to an irony embedded within the social and political relations outlined in this chapter: the fact that Tostan's local staff members' efforts to work together to advocate for better employment conditions in the face of organisational opposition ironically exemplified the spontaneous grassroots movement for which Tostan has itself become lauded. Indeed, this collaboration was arguably more participatory and democratic than the externally managed Tostan village programme itself, and was at least partly the result of union members' understandings of themselves as individuals claiming their human rights (including their right to speak), while simultaneously exercising their formal knowledge of local employment laws. The deliberate curbing by Tostan management of narratives produced by this movement that contradicted the image of the organisation as reflecting values of equity and empowerment further indicates the relevance of David Mosse's observation that 'success' in a development institution is generated through a stabilised narrative of events, rather than through

[64] It is important to note here that only the highest level staff (such as the Director of Operations, who—publicly filed US government tax returns from 2010 show—drew a higher salary than the Director, despite the fact that the former worked part-time [Tostan 2010d]) had managed to negotiate such favourable terms. Indeed, many of the expatriates were also retained as 'consultants.' However, their remuneration was much closer to being sufficient to covering living expenses in an adequate way than that of a maid such as Astou, and arguably, it was more reasonable to consider the work undertaken by them as falling under the category of a 'consultancy' (again in contrast to the work of a domestic cleaner). They themselves were known to grumble about this classification, however, but accepted it.

policies or practices themselves (Mosse 2005). In many ways, the values practised at the management level were closer in culture and philosophy to the values of the for-profit business world alongside which the 'moral' character of NGOs is often juxtaposed. In this regard, I believe Tostan is hardly the exception, but is in fact illustrative of the 'neoliberal turn' (Molyneux 2008) underpinning corporate donor-driven development activities in the contemporary era.

# Chapter 8

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to offer an example of ethnographic research as 'scholarship with commitment,' which Bourdieu (2003: 20) understood as:

> Submit[ting] dominant discourse to a merciless logical critique aimed not only at its lexicon […] but also at its mode of reasoning and in particular at the use of metaphors […] It can furthermore subject this discourse to a sociological critique aimed at uncovering the social determinants that bear on the producers of dominant discourse […] and on their products.

This objective has informed the analysis threaded throughout the thesis, derived from long-term fieldwork that focused on the discourse, ideology and practices underpinning the social and political relations of an NGO 'on the ground' in Senegal, from a critical standpoint. I summarise and discuss this ethnographic exploration in the concluding remarks that follow.

As described in the opening chapter, like many foreigners whom I encountered through my experience with the NGO Tostan in Senegal, I was originally drawn to the organisation because it appeared to offer real, potentially radical, answers to contemporary questions of gender, neo-imperialism, racism and justice in post-colonial Africa—one volunteer remarked that he had first heard of Tostan in a university Women's Studies class in the US alongside readings by postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty, known for her critiques of the political project of Western feminism, and advocacy for anti-capitalist struggle against neoliberal globalisation (e.g. Mohanty 1984; 2003). This external perspective was informed by, for example, the public references made by Tostan's founder and Director, Molly Melching, to her relationship with renowned pan-Africanist scholar and political activist Cheikh Anta Diop, and his influence on Tostan's work (Molloy 2013: 227), as well as the influence of her interactions with the writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène (ibid.), often referred to as 'the father of African film' and a committed social progressive and political radical (Scott 2007). Stating that Diop was her mentor at the University of Dakar, and that he 'introduced her to the meaning of the word "*tostan*"' (i.e. 'breakthrough') (Molloy 2013: 227), Melching says that her NGO work was influenced by Diop

and Sembène's ideas about 'the importance of national languages for development' (ibid.: 63).

Tostan's 'culturally respectful' approach (Tostan 2011c), including its incorporation of local languages and methods of communication (e.g. theatre, song, and storytelling) into its programme, as well as the enrolment of 'local religious and traditional leaders' (Tostan 2009a: 11), and its mainly locally-sourced labour force, thus appeared to constitute the NGO 'magic bullet' solution of bottom-up, participatory development so sought after within globalised discourses of development (Edwards and Hulme 1995). In this light, reference by the NGO to leading pan-Africanist figures such as Diop and Sembène, whose work within post-colonial African struggles for cultural and political rebirth was marked by imprisonment (in Diop's case) and censorship (in Sembène's case) situates Tostan's 'movement for transformational social change' (UNICEF 2010: 12) as an heir to these revolutionary endeavours.

However, through an ethnographic exploration of Tostan's contemporary politics and practices, involving the juxtaposition and analysis of the range of strategic narratives and divergent practices I encountered among different actors associated with the organisation, I concluded, and attempt to demonstrate in this thesis, that instead of offering a genuine alternative to dominant understandings of and approaches to matters of social justice in Africa, Tostan largely appropriates merely the rhetoric and some of the techniques of political radicalism, as programmatic and marketing tools. In this process, I argue, the NGO conforms to and consolidates a cultural and political paradigm of 'development' circumscribed by a neoliberal orthodoxy that 'increasingly target[s] women as the desired beneficiaries and agents of progress' (Rankin 2001: 19). Related to this conclusion, I came to agree with Mosse's (2005: 184) view that 'development success depends upon socially sustained interpretations' and posit that as an NGO, Tostan's 'development success' lies more in its ability to interface in an appropriate and convincing way with a range of stakeholders, or members of its 'interpretive communities' (ibid.: 8)—in relationships characterised by unequal distributions of power—in order to advance its scope of activities and funding base, than in achieving its stated objectives, such as the empowerment of women through the abandonment of FGC. I argue that this process of generating 'development success' is carried out through the production and reinforcement of particular (moralising) narratives, in a context marked by the employment of strategies of knowing and unknowing by a range of interconnected actors.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the lives of ordinary people in Senegal are strongly impacted by

neocolonial political, cultural and economic structures that serve to (re)produce poverty and inequality, leaving most people with limited economic opportunities within a context marked by historical colonial intervention in the social, as well as the economic domains, i.e., the French *mission civilisatrice* (Conklin 1997). As described at the beginning of the same chapter, despite the fact that Tostan is largely viewed locally as a '*toubab*' (Western) organisation (and one that intervenes in the politically and culturally sensitive matter of FGC at that), leaders and participants in beneficiary communities publicly accept and express gratitude to the NGO for its attempts to effect social change among them. A key proposition of this thesis is that these attitudes closely correlate with the constraints of prevailing economic conditions that impact on beneficiaries (exemplified by the efforts of my host 'mother,' Bintou, to advance her economic situation through efforts to get paid employment with Tostan), and that these circumstances, in tandem with the organisation's 'culturally respectful' approach (Tostan 2011c) coupled with 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2012a) by powerful actors within the NGO of these very circumstances and constraints, provide the conditions for the implementation of Tostan's programme and its acceptance within local networks of power.

Human rights promotion is a key element of Tostan's intervention, and Chapter 2 explored how Tostan's institutional role involves the 'translation' of human rights messages 'up and down' (Merry 2006: 42), as normative values. I argued here that Tostan's idealistic, ahistorical representation of human rights knowledge, coupled with technical solutions to poverty and inequity, offers an apolitical, individualistic solution to 'global challenges' (Osberg 2009); the definition of which is strongly influenced by corporate donors striving to enhance their image of corporate social responsibility through association with a so-called grassroots organisation focusing on female empowerment. Tostan's development strategy aimed at producing a particular type of knowing subject thus constitutes social personhood and individual needs in a manner consistent with neoliberalism (defined by David Harvey [2005: 2] as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'). The education offered by Tostan sidelines active inquiry as a strategy to address structural inequalities, in the process reifying a particular idea of personhood in relation to the state and society; circumscribing imagined futures; and depoliticising inequality, an effect that is highly political in origin. In this schema, the concept of the social is premised on the idea that society consists of individuals 'entering into forms of social contract with each other which deny pre-existing forms of hierarchy, dependency

or powerlessness' (Stirrat 2008: 414-415). In this context, the focus on personal responsibility forms part of a political perspective that 'shift[s] public attention downward and inward, instead of upward and outward' (Petras 1997: 1589).

Chapter 3's focus on Tostan's position within globalised debates on FGC demonstrated how the organisation may be understood as ideologically embedded within, and at least partially derived from, a Western-influenced cultural and political framework that defines and reifies one set of bodily practices as harmful, and another, comparable, set of practices as benign, or even beneficial (i.e. female and male genital cutting practices, respectively), within a neo-missionary discourse of development intervention in Africa. Tostan's official discourse conveys the adoption of particular knowledge and values that it claims result from its intervention as a consensus, the result of dialogue and reasoning on the part of its participant communities, thereby leading to their empowerment.[65] However, because the terms and outcomes of the debate in its area of intervention are predetermined by the organisation itself (i.e. the adoption of human rights values that lead to the abandonment of FGC and consequent empowerment of women), rather than by participants (as the organisational rhetoric suggests), Tostan may be differentiated from other activist organisations almost uniquely on the basis of the sophistication of its narratives (predicated on the 'soft sell' approach [Kristof and WuDunn 2009: 22] of its language and methods, particularly in relation to FGC) rather than on its manifestation of the values it espouses.

Chapter 4 explored how Tostan attempts to resolve this paradox, inherent in its position as an international organisation with an externally inspired agenda that wishes to convey to both local and external stakeholders the perception that it is a grassroots, participatory intervention. Through an ethnographic examination of the situation of FGC in southern Senegal among people who have undergone the Tostan programme, I elucidated the ways in which a variety of actors in this milieu rely on strategic knowing and unknowing as they hope to maintain or advance their positions within hierarchies of power, as well as analysing the different types of knowledge (re)produced within this process. Examination of Tostan's production and screening of an awareness-raising

[65] Indeed, in common with many development projects, 'communities' are pre-identified as clusters whose needs have been externally determined for the purposes of the programme itself, while simultaneously packaged and marketed for donors, activists and other external stakeholders as 'a community-led approach to sustainable development' (Tostan 2011b), similar to Erica Bornstein's (2005: 121), finding, with regard to an international NGO in Zimbabwe, that 'participation was an agenda whose inspiration was external to communities, transnational and fiscally inspired.'

film, which, in the tradition of Sembène (whose 1971 Jola-language film *Emitaï,* set in Casamance, told of the forced conscription of locals into the French army in World War II), uses the medium of film as a way to reach largely illiterate local populations (as well as in this case to reinforce the NGO's image as a grassroots movement to external stakeholders), exemplifies the argument that Tostan employs 'strategic ignorance' (McGoey 2012a) of the local milieu coupled with the appropriation of techniques of political radicalism, in order to communicate a message of political orthodoxy.

Chapter 5 considered the ways in which Tostan's founder and Director acts as a 'broker of meaning' (Hilhorst 2003: 223), viewing her as a protean actor who employs her cultural knowledge in order to legitimate the NGO's position in the eyes of a diverse range of stakeholders, within local and global relationships of power. I argued that as an 'interface expert' (ibid.: 182), the Director exercises such knowledge and ignorance strategically in a variety of social contexts in order to accommodate diverse perspectives and consolidate and maximise the mobilisation of resources for her organisation. In harnessing the potential of her personal story as a marketing tool for her organisation (including displays of her cultural capital in the embodied form of local language and dance), as well as communicating the stories of individual beneficiaries in ways appropriate and meaningful to external stakeholders, I suggest that Melching's activities exemplify the demands and constraints that circumscribe those working within the neoliberal development paradigm, wherein social relations and outcomes are primarily conceived of in terms of 'individualised actions and decisions' (Johnson 2009: 5). By demonstrating how the Director strategically balances knowledge and ignorance of the elements of her organisational structure and processes that conflict with its public image as a grassroots movement (e.g. the power that is exercised by the Director herself, and external stakeholders such as donors, to define problems, needs and solutions), I argue that she engages in 'political acts of composition' (Mosse 2005: 9) that themselves ignore the material difference and inequality within such relationships of power.

Chapter 6 offered an ethnographic exploration of the experiences of Tostan's volunteers, highlighting organisational understandings and uses of the concept of 'culture,' and situating these actors as transnational knowledge workers located within the politics of altruism, tasked with making appropriate representations of Tostan's activities to external stakeholders. The volunteers' 'knowledge work' (Colic-Peisker 2010) exemplifies the NGO's preoccupation with the production and maintenance of strategic narratives in its representations to these stakeholders,

facilitated by the former's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986): in particular their familiarity with the language and culture of powerful donors, and their ability to communicate appropriately with them. I argue that this process is capacitated not only by the volunteers' social backgrounds and formal education, but also by the cultural orientation programme they undergo at Tostan that attempts to inculcate a way of thinking and speaking about culture as reified and ontologically secure. This understanding of culture is not only transmitted formally through the orientation programme, but also, I argue, through organisational relations and practices. These include management's admonishment of the local staff in Thiès not to interact with volunteers in order to avoid potential conflict, and the depoliticised logic of 'giving back' underpinning individual and organisational narratives that portray volunteering as a selfless and culturally-neutral practice that facilitates the development of target groups in the global South through the transmission of human rights knowledge. The analysis in this chapter of the ambiguous social spaces which these actors inhabit elucidates the ways in which Tostan, as a professional development organisation, is characterised by 'multiple realities' (Hilhorst 2003: 146) and meanings within the culture of late capitalism, which for many of the volunteers concerned, involves the (conscious or unconscious) reinforcement of networks of privilege.

Chapter 7's focus on Tostan's employees examined the ways in which organisational politics played out as local actors exercised their knowledge of rights and the moral character of the organisation's vision to underpin their efforts to organise for better conditions, arguing that this movement, in the face of opposition from the NGO's management, ironically offers an authentic example of the grassroots social mobilisation for which Tostan has become famous. I suggest that a key contributing factor to this mobilisation (influenced by the tragic and almost invisible loss of a young child whose father occupied a liminal, if not ignored, position within the organisation) was the fact that the local staff were familiar with the human rights ideology underpinning their employer's mission, and that this philosophy, as well as the organisation's explicit commitment to dialogue as a method of problem resolution, emboldened them to demand changes and improvements to organisational policies that affected them.

However, the conflicting understandings of expressions such as 'rights,' 'empowerment' and 'dialogue' witnessed in these interactions bring to mind the following passage from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:*

> 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.' 'The question is this,' said Alice, 'whether you

> can make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.' (Carroll 2001[1865]: 364, emphasis in original)

As this exchange indicates, 'power is not only a question of wording, but is a question of who commands it' (Navarro 2006: 20). Organisational commitments to the principle of 'dialogue' and consensus at all levels were thus easily hollowed out by the denial of staff requests to attend Board of Directors meetings, for example. The gaps highlighted in Chapter 7 between official organisational discourse and its everyday practices within relations of power indicate how 'unknowing' forms of difference and inequality within these relationships is foundational to the rhetoric of partnership and collaboration underpinning Tostan's narratives.

Contrary to its rhetoric, then, I argue that the ethnographic material presented in this thesis suggests that Tostan as an organisation engages only in the most superficial way with the circumstances of social, political and economic inequality and the cultural politics of the postcolonial milieux inhabited by its participants, staff members and advocates. Instead it offers a fantastical vision of a world where everyone knows their rights, and is completely free to take decisions to ensure these are respected, a vision that ignores how the realisation of equality is sharply checked by a host of political, economic and institutional barriers. Its programmatic emphasis on tradition and social norms as both the cause and solution to the problem of 'development' ignores the macro-level social, economic and institutional causes of inequality, factors that are all too real in prohibiting the true achievement of its stated aim of 'dignity for all.'

However, such a judgment in no way implies that the organisation is anything but a 'success,' if one takes the view that that success in this context is 'an institutional process and not an objective fact'; that it is 'not objectively verifiable but socially produced' (Mosse 2005: 172). If the view is taken that Tostan's primary organisational preoccupation is to extend its networks, acquire funding, achieve 'replication' for its 'social change' model in other countries (Diop 2003) or in relation to other 'problems' in Senegal, in a process contingent on the continued enrolment of interpretive communities primarily consisting of local beneficiaries, and donors, then the organisation clearly succeeds in its mission.

A further argument made in this thesis is that forms of strategic unknowing are key to the representation that Tostan achieves its programmatic goals (especially the abandonment of FGC, where verbal declarations thereof constitute a measure of project success). The accomplishments of the NGO in achieving legitimation and replication for its projects lies in the fact that its

activities are open to multiple interpretations by stakeholders with varying degrees of knowledge and diverse perspectives on the intervention. Like other NGOs, for Tostan, 'ignorance […] acts as a black-box, the inability of its audience to question and engage with its spectacle of development, [and] serves to reify and further convince spectators of its legitimacy' (Allen 2013: 69).

An NGO such as Tostan does not therefore operate within a single discursive framework of 'development.' Demonstrating that 'local actors are not merely overcome by development: they interpret, bend and negotiate it' (Hilhorst 2003: 9), I have attempted to show that there is a 'multiplicity of voices' in this milieu, even if 'some are more powerful than others' (Grillo 1997: 22). However, I agree with Fisher's argument that 'just as the development apparatus has generally depoliticized the need for development through its practice of treating local conditions as problems that required technical and not structural or political solutions [Ferguson 1990], it now defines problems that can be addressed via the mechanisms of NGOs rather than through political solutions' (Fisher 1997: 446). In this regard, NGOs such as Tostan are hardly alone, but instead exemplify what Arundhati Roy characterises as the growing 'NGO-ization of resistance' (Roy 2014). Discussing NGOs in a broad political context, Roy argues that:

> Most large-funded NGOs are financed and patronized by aid and development agencies, which are, in turn, funded by Western governments, the World Bank, the UN and some multinational corporations. Though they may not be the very same agencies, they are certainly part of the same loose, political formation that oversees the neoliberal project and demands the slash in government spending in the first place. Why should these agencies fund NGOs? Could it be just old-fashioned missionary zeal? Guilt? It's a little more than that. NGOs give the impression that they are filling the vacuum created by a retreating state. And they are, but in a materially inconsequential way. Their real contribution is that they defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. They alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance. NGOs form a sort of buffer between the sarkar and public. Between Empire and its subjects. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators. (Roy 2014)

Drawing on this assertion, I borrow Roy's term to argue that an NGO such as Tostan offers an example of the increasing 'NGO-ization' of the concept of social justice itself (wherein social justice is understood as 'justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society,' Stevenson 2010: 1679). The circumscription of the catalytic potential of social movements within the framework of the 'non-profit industrial complex' (Roy 2014; Rodríguez 2007), means that meaningful social and political dissent is marginalised, and a

disciplinary force may be exerted on individuals and movements that attempt to harness human rights or democratic principles for truly destabilising social and political effect. As I have shown, one of Tostan's major organisational preoccupations it to *be seen* to be participatory, 'culturally respectful' (Tostan 2011c), and accountable to its beneficiaries in the eyes of its 'interpretive communities' (Mosse 2005: 8), which include most notably the beneficiaries themselves, and donors. This preoccupation with 'the spectacle of development work' (Allen 2013: 16) is a direct consequence of the demands placed on development activists operating within the framework of the 'non-profit industrial complex,' which can be understood as 'the institutionalization and industrialization of a banal, liberal political dialogue that constantly disciplines [activists] into conceding the urgent challenges of [a] political radicalism' (Rodríguez 2007: 39).

As I have demonstrated, the decision by Tostan's founder and Director to incorporate her social work under the rubric of a US 501(c)3 non-governmental organisation situates her intervention within a particular political framework of 'social programming,' explained by Agustín (2007b: 530) as follows:

> Social programming requires a wide array of figures, most of whom are paid a decent wage, granted positive social status and encouraged to gain ever more knowledge about the people they set out to serve: languages, cultural traits, religious and moral values, details of intimate practices. Each of these *savoirs* produces a proliferation of responsibilities and tasks for helpers, necessitating more projects.

Most significantly, social movements situated within the non-profit industrial complex are part of what Nickel and Eikenberry (2009: 975) describe as:

> Emerging forms of marketized philanthropy [that] depoliticize discourse by collapsing the distance between the market and the negative impacts it has on human well-being […] marketized philanthropy stabilizes the very system that results in poverty, disease and environmental destruction […] it creates the appearance of giving back, disguising the fact that it is already based in taking away.

As Roy (2014) argues, NGOs are thus forced to operate within a 'shallow framework, more or less shorn of a political or historical context.' She describes them as 'an indicator species' for contemporary neoliberalism, contending that the growth of NGOs can be directly correlated with the increasing 'devastation caused by neoliberalism' (ibid.). In his recent book *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, historian Philip Mirowski argues that neoliberal thought has become so pervasive that any evidence to the contrary merely serves to further convince disciples of its

ultimate truth, contending that it has become a 'Theory of Everything,' providing a 'revolutionary account of self, knowledge, information, markets, and government' (Mirowski 2014: 6). Acknowledging critiques of the frequency with which the concept of neoliberalism is invoked in academic discussion (Rowlands and Rawolle 2013), and resisting the argument that neoliberalism has indeed become a 'Theory of Everything,' I nonetheless conclude this thesis with the observation that given the stated claim of the subject of this research to represent the African 'grassroots,' one is left to ponder the question posed by John Harriss in conclusion to his analysis of World Bank politics, wherein he references a song composed by striking US miners in the 1930s, as follows:

> When we dance with the powerful in order to 'influence them,' we must always ask who is being influenced—and remind ourselves of the challenge in the song from Harlan County '*which side are you on*?' (Harriss 2002: 120, emphasis in original)

In choosing to 'dance with the powerful,' the politics and practices of Tostan as an organisation converge with the requisites of the neoliberal development paradigm, in a symbiotic relationship where one institution provides legitimacy for another, and the power to define problems and solutions through a depoliticised discourse of 'human rights' is claimed by both. If, as the Tostan project posits, social justice is predicated on the institutionalisation of individual rights, then human rights may indeed represent the best approach to its achievement. However, if, as I argue in this thesis, inequity and suffering may be understood as the result of the consolidation of postcolonial political formations and the growth of deregulated, globalised capitalism that combine to disenfranchise peoples everywhere, then alternative political projects—perhaps best exemplified in the truly 'grassroots' movement of solidarity among Tostan's staff members described in these pages—may offer the most hope for a solution.

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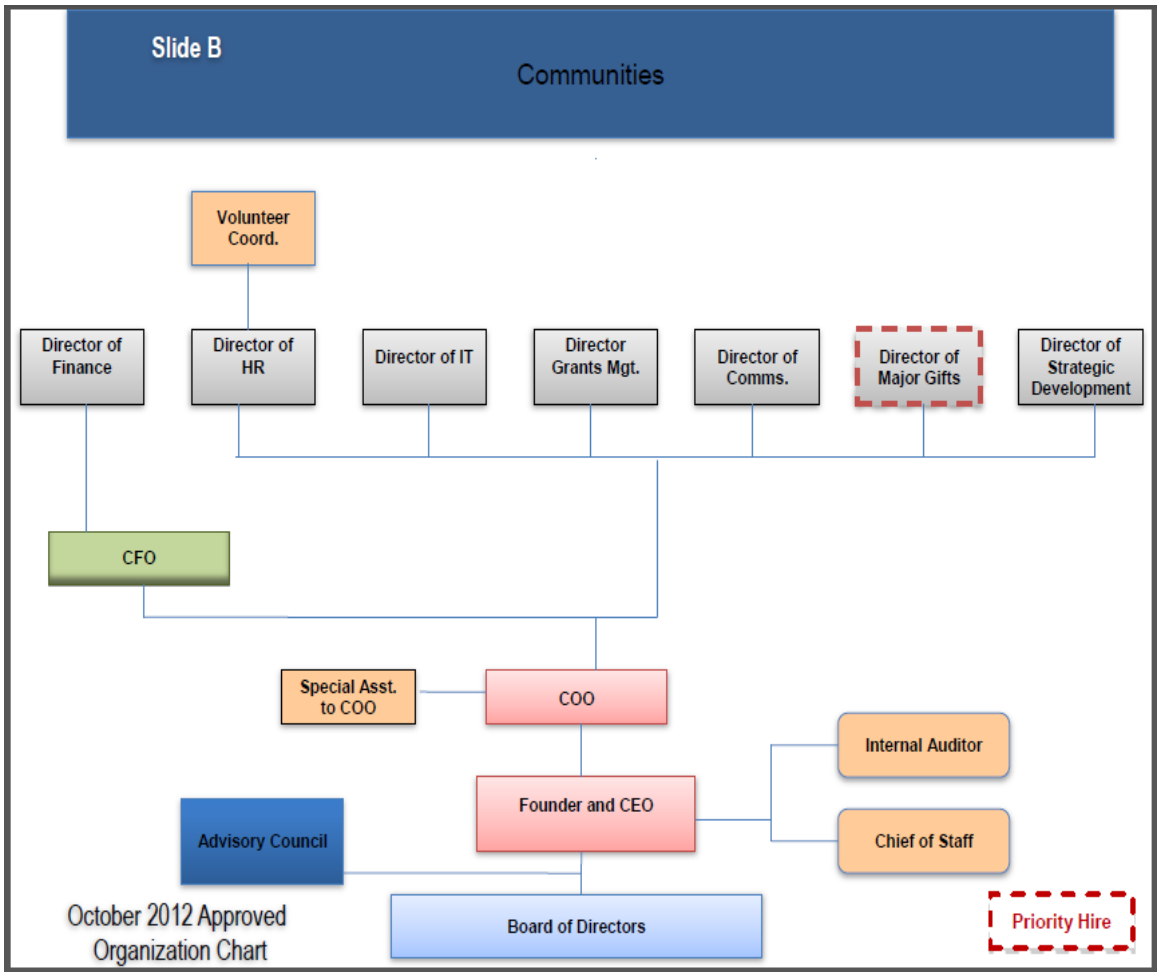
## Appendix A: Tostan Organisational Chart (October 2012)




Note on acronyms:

HR: Human Resources

IT: Information Technology

CFO: Chief Financial Officer

COO: Chief Operating Officer

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

## Appendix B: Tostan Donation Appeal Email (November 2010)

# Empowerment: The Best Gift You Can Give (Plus Right Now All Donations Are Doubled!)

Tostan
Community-led Development

November 29, 2010

Dear Maire,
Happy "Cyber Monday!" I hope your holidays are off to a great start. As the season begins in earnest and our days get busier, I wanted to remind you of a unique and fun gift to send: a contribution to Tostan in a loved one's name.

Each year, more and more people are giving Tostan as a gift. Whether it's for that family member who cares deeply about the women, girls, and communities of Africa, or for a friend who is passionate about great causes around the world, your donation to Tostan can make the perfect gift. Plus, it's a thoughtful way to share your interests with others. And right now, it does even more!

## A Rare Opportunity: Double Your Gift with our Year-End Match!

Until December 31st, your donation to Tostan's community development programs in West and East Africa will be matched by one of our generous donors. What does that mean for you? **When you give today, your contribution will be doubled instantly,** providing more education, tools and training to African communities.
Your gift will bring comprehensive, human-rights based education to villages across Africa, helping mothers and fathers and sons and daughters better their own lives through increased knowledge and skills. At the same time, you will spread good wishes and awareness in your own community by giving Tostan as a gift, **especially if you choose one of our popular greeting cards or e-cards for Tostan to send with your donation.** In fact, since your gift is being doubled, why not send two!
Now is the best time to give: $50 becomes $100 and $250 becomes $500 thanks to our matching program. And that's on top of the fact that our low-overhead, high-impact model is already one of the most efficient around, bringing democracy and human rights, problem solving, hygiene and health, literacy, technology, and project management to tens of thousands of families each year.
After all, why give electronics when you can give the gift of empowerment?

DONATE NOW

Wishing you all the best this holiday season,

Director of External Relations